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BLOWING RINGS OF SMOKE INTO THE AIR, AND WINKING LUDICROUSLY AT THE
ASTONISHED BUCKSKIN AND HIS COMPANIONS.

OR,
Old Kit Bandy, the Border Sleuth.

BY OLL COOMES,
AUTHOR OF "WHIP-KING JOE," "BABY SAM,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.
LITTLE BUCKSKIN.

THE crack of a rifle and the wild shout of human voices rung out on the summer air, starting a hundred reverberating echoes among the foot-hills of the grim old mountains.

With cries of affright the birds started from their retreat among the pines, and the deer, loitering in the shade of the wooded canyon, bounded away as the clatter of hooved feet came thundering down the narrow defile.

A few moments later—while yet the sound of

gun and voice was hanging in the hills—a horseman shot from the shadowy pass out into the open plain that stretched away in an apparent unbroken expanse toward the east, and like a bird on the wing glided along with wonderful rapidity.

The horseman is a young man—a boy not over eighteen. His form is lithe, supple and sinewy as a young panther. Long brown hair floats out from beneath a white sombrero. Dark-gray eyes fairly glow with a light that is reflected from the depth of a fearless heart. The smooth, bronzed face, the half-parted lips wreathed with a half-smile, and, in fact, every feature, and the very poise of the head, and the expression of the face, are indicative of a love of adventure—the spirit of a young dare-devil.

With the exception of his hat, the boy is dressed in a full suit of buckskin, with fringed leggings, beaded moccasins, and a hunting-shirt wrought in a fanciful style. Around his slender form is a belt filled with cartridges. At his back is slung a rifle, while at his saddle-bow hangs a revolver.

The boy is fleeing from danger—from a score of mounted Cheyenne Indians, who, like so many demons, suddenly burst from the canyon on the trail of the youth, brandishing their tomahawks and uttering fiendish yells. They do not ride together nor abreast, but string out along the plain in "Indian file." From beneath their horses' hoofs clouds of dust burst at every bound, and rising on the air, mingle in one long line reaching back to the hills like a shadowy serpent.

As they appear from the shadows of the pass the fugitive's horse settles closer to the ground, stretches out his neck, and seems to almost double his wonderful speed. Every bound carries his young rider further and further from danger.

Conscious of the superior speed of his horse, young dare-devil, ever and anon, glances back over his shoulder, waves his sombrero above his head, and shouts back defiance to the foe.

Soon a mile separates the boy from the foremost Indian, when he reins in his animal to a walk, and deliberately permits him to crop the grass as he moves along.

Half-turning in his saddle the young plainsman keeps his eye upon the foe, a grim smile upon his face. The red-skins are still strung out along the plain for over half a mile and as the leader draws near the boy unslings his rifle, stops his horse and dismounts. Then, resting the weapon in the hollow of his saddle he takes a steady aim at the red-skin, but the latter seeing his movements drops forward upon his mustang's neck. But little the boy cares for that! He presses the trigger and the Indian's horse drops in his tracks throwing his rider, who performs a somerset in the air.

Then remounting the boy gallops on.

The unhorsed savage gathers up his effects and is taken on behind the next in the band, and the chase continues.

But, at the rate with which the boy gains upon the foe, nothing save accident or superior endurance on the part of the savages' horses, can endanger his life. Of these the youth has no fear. On the contrary, he seems to court the danger and excitement of that wild ride for life.

Miles are thus traversed, and fully two miles separate the pursuers and pursued, when the tops of a belt of trees bordering on Panther creek, a tributary of the Arkansas, burst suddenly on the boy's view. The valley is deep down in the plain and the bluffs are abrupt and precipitous, but, never halting, the reckless young horseman plunges down the declivity. He has scarcely gained the valley when his ears are greeted by the sound of voices.

Looking to the left he discovers a party of four white men encamped under a cluster of trees. They are dressed in the garb of hunters, though the boy sees at a glance that they are but amateurs. And seeing further that they are unaware of approaching danger, he turns his horse and rides into their camp, demanding as he reins in his steed:

"Hullo! is this an outlaw camp?"

"No; are you hunting friends?" was the facetious reply of the eldest of the quartette of young hunters.

"I'm in need of friends 'bout now," replied the rider.

"Why so? What's wrong? I see you've been riding pretty hard."

"I should trill that I had, stranger, and I rather think you fellows'd better be dustin' out of this if you don't want your hair banged."

"What do you mean?"

"A million Ingins are comin' over the plain a-boomin' this holy, sanctified minute."

"You're jesting, boy!"

"Well, if you don't take my word for it, you'll have to take the consequences. I'm no great shakes of a liar, strangers, and—"

"Well, who are you, anyhow?"

"Buckskin Phil," was the boy's reply.

"Is that a fact? Hurrah! Billy!" exclaimed the amateurs.

"Well, what will it be?" demanded Little Buckskin, for he this fearless boy was; "flee or fight? The red-skins are not far away. I see you're all well-armed, and if you want to stand the reds a racket I'll stay by you, for you won't have time to pack up and git away too."

"Then we'll fight," said the spokesman of the amateurs, "if there is any show for victory, but if there are a million Indians, as you say, seems to me it will be folly to attempt to meet them."

"We can whip 'em, boys, I know," declared Buckskin, leaping from his saddle; "foller me to the top of the bluff and feast your eyes on the hair-bangers of the prairies!"

Hastily ascending the bluff, they beheld the savages even closer than Little Buckskin had supposed they were.

"Great Moses!" burst from the lips of one of the amateurs, as he beheld the startling sight.

Little Buckskin burst into a peal of laughter.

"You folks've never been under fire, have you?" he observed.

"Never, I freely and frankly admit," replied one of the amateurs.

"Well, you want to keep cool, take a careful aim, and I'll bet we give them gallinippers a loud ole surprise-party."

"They're five to one, Buckskin," said one of the hunters.

"Don't care if they are; all we've got to do is to put one well-directed broadside into their systems, and you'll see the others turn tail and scratch mountainward like so many coyotes. You can't foolish me on the sand of a red-skin. They think I'm here all alone. They chased me here clear over from the mountains. But now, strangers, git ready. I'll draw on the fifth red-skin back in the line, and you next to me take the fourth, and the next the third, and so on, so as not to waste two bullets on one red-skin. Now, all git ready and shoot to spoil! Steady—aim—fire!"

On the instant the five rifles rung out with a crash, and three savages tumbled from their animals, while the pony of a fourth one went down.

A yell burst from the lips of Little Buckskin, and springing up into plain view of the Cheyennes, he said:

"Git up here, boys, and show yourselves, and we'll scare the stuffin' out o' them other red-skins—they'll think we're a regiment."

Quickly the four amateurs leaped upon the bank, and as the boy had predicted, the foe drew rein, turned and hurried out of range of the white men's rifles.

"That'll satisfy them critters for to-day," assured Little Buckskin. "They got terribly foolished trailin' over here; they run against a snag—corked themselves, the musty-skinned coyotes! But say, boys! You slam in lead real nasty like—should figger that you was the clear mettle, put up for Western trade. Now, what might your names be, strangers?"

"My name," answered the eldest of the party, "is Robert Malvern—Bob, for short. This is Deck Robbins, this Clark Lewis, and this Fred Lawrence—all out for a season of recreation and sport."

"Well, Bob, Dick, Lewis and Fred," said the jolly boy plainsman, "I'm tremendous glad to meet you. I like sport myself, and if you fellows'll jist drop down to my shebang, I'll take pains and pleasure to see that you have all the fun you want. The trappin' season hasn't quite opened yet, and so I'll have a week or two to amble around and stir up the hornets."

"My dear sir," declared Bob Malvern, "we've been headed for your quarters a week or more. We heard of you two hundred miles from here, and concluded you were the chap we wanted to show us around."

"I can do it, boys," returned Buckskin; "and since the Ingins are on a little rampage, we'll recreate a-fightin' reds and take our fun in huntin' deer an' elk in the hills and buffalo on the plain."

"Say, Buffalo," demanded Deck Robbins, "if you call fightin' red-skins recreation, what the dickens do you call serious work?"

"Wrestlin' with a cyclone, or gittin' out of a den of pole-cats without bein' bit, is what I call danger. But say, them Ingins have all departed, and we'd as well pack up and be movin'."

It's twenty miles to my cabin, and it's now a mile past noon."

So saying, they all returned to the valley, when the amateurs proceeded to pack up their "traps," and in a very short time the five were mounted and riding down the valley.

Robert Malvern—the leader of his party—two years before we introduce him, had wooed and won Augusta Darre, a beautiful girl, the daughter of a Kentucky gentleman of the "old school." She was gentle and refined, and untainted with the prejudices against all "Northern" men which many a Southern man nursed and nurtured until it developed into not infrequent violent expressions and acts. Of this class was Colonel Darre, the father of Augusta. Finding that she had given her affections to young Malvern, who came from a Northern State, he became both cruel and aggressive, and on the occasion of the last meeting of the lovers, he had suddenly appeared on the scene, and grossly insulting the young man, ordered him off the place, and forbade Augusta ever again to receive the young "Yankee."

High-spirited and brave enough not to brook insult or wrong from any man, he yet, for Augusta's sake, refrained from resentment, and passed from the grounds. That was his last sight of his betrothed.

In leaving the place Robert had encountered Paul Dumont, a neighboring planter and the suitor for Augusta's hand favored by Colonel Darre. Dumont also insults the young man, and gets very severely punished for his insolence—Robert repeatedly knocking him down until he begs for mercy. He vows the direst vengeance on Robert, threatening to have his life for the punishment inflicted.

All this was two years gone, and proceeding to his Northern home, Robert had not only not heard from his beloved, but had grown to think her untrue to him, and so she became, to his mind, a kind of living, expressionless sorrow, to drown which he sought the excitement of this trip to the West. His face was now bronzed by the sun and wind of the prairie, and a heavy brown mustache gave a mature look to his handsome face.

His companions were all younger than himself—in fact, mere boys—Fred Lawrence, the youngest, being but eighteen.

To the amateurs Little Buckskin, the Young Centaur of the Prairie, proved himself fully up to their expectations. He was not only brave and daring, but a jolly, jovial spirit, such as only the wild West could produce.

As they rode along Bob Malvern asked:

"Buckskin, what is your true name, and how long have you been a hunter and trapper?"

"My name's Phil Barker, and I've been a trapper ever since I can remember. My parents died when I was a kid, and a friend of father's took me to raise. He was a hunter and trapper, and built the cabin where I still live."

"Then you have no education?—never attended school?"

"Never went to school; but Moses! it'd break your heart to hear me read, see me write, and observe me figger up the cost of a season's hunt, or figger down the cost of a year's supplies. Then you see I have another source of collats in doin' scoutin' work for the ranchmen, an' in keepin' an eye open for the stage an' express companies. This I do when the huntin' season's out."

"It's a wonder the Indians haven't killed you before this," observed Malvern.

"Me and the red-skins have been as thick as fleas on a sick rabbit all along till lately. They stole a number of hosses from some mining prospectors, and I led the trail in pursuit of them. We got the hosses, but had to salivate three red-skins, so now they're no longer my chums. I expect they'll bang my hair if they git fingers into it."

Thus the conversation ran on, as mile after mile was passed over. All the while the amateurs noticed that the Young Centaur's eyes were constantly on the watch. Not for a single moment did he seem to forget himself in thus looking out for danger. Vigilance was one of the very elements of his nature.

The sun had sunk behind the mountain range when the party came in sight of the Lone Lodge, as Buckskin's cabin was called. And it was still light when they dismounted near the cabin, unpacked and unsaddled their horses and tethered them to grass. This done, Buckskin led the way to his quarters. The door stood partly open, just as he had left it. Pushing it entirely open he entered the room, and was followed by his four friends.

"Been somebody here since I left," was the

youth's remark the moment he entered the cabin; "but then my latch-string's always out to friends."

"That seems to be a custom of the country," said Malvern.

"Yes, and that is a customer!"

The cabin was divided into two rooms, and as Little Buckskin uttered these words he pointed toward the partition door in which had suddenly appeared a tall Cheyenne savage, hideous in war-paint.

At the same instant a couch of skins in one corner of the room was flung aside and three more savages confronted the startled Little Buckskin and his guests! And to still add to their surprise and terror, two more painted demons sprung from behind the door and aligned themselves with their friends—each and all clutching a tomahawk in his hand ready for bloody work.

The savage first discovered still stood in the door behind his five companions, towering almost a head above them, his face wearing a strange, half-comical expression.

Little Buckskin saw at a glance that they were there for mischief, yet no sign of fear or surprise was depicted upon his face. His friends were fairly startled, but seeing the outward calmness and apparent indifference of Buckskin, they were at loss to understand what was to be expected.

"Ugh!" grunted the savage in the door, as the boy hunter pointed toward him and addressed him as above. "Ingins catch pale-face like pale-face catch beaver!"

"Well, that sounds like a threat, don't it?" was the boy's response.

"You bet! We come git pale-face scalp," declared one of the Indians, who had taken a position in the line, and spoke English perfectly.

By this remark the amateurs saw that it would now be impossible to avert a bloody encounter. With hands upon their revolvers, they watched every movement of the foe—waiting only for a word from their young leader to act.

"I tell you what, red-skins, it'll break your hearts to bang our hair. You can see we're tender boys," Buckskin went on, "and it's no honor for big warriors to kill a lot of children. Still, if you're determined on a rumpus—bound to cork yourselves, you'll find you've struck the liveliest outfit that ever landed in these parts."

"Pale-face boy big talk," replied a savage.

"Yes, and it'll melt you into tears to see how straight we can shoot," Buckskin retorted; "and the very instant one of you attempts to raise a hatchet, we'll all plug you. Don't forget it."

This last remark was intended more for the ears of his four young friends than the savages; and to let the brave boy understand that he caught his meaning, Bob Malvern echoed:

"Yes; the first attempt to raise a tomahawk will be the signal for us to shoot."

"Oh, I see, red-skins," Buckskin continued, "that you're all broke up—surprised. You expected I'd be back here alone—didn't estimate I'd return with four young buck cyclones, did ye? Didn't know that my medicine is good, and that—"

He did not finish the sentence, for at this moment the savage in the door behind the five suddenly raised his tomahawk as if to strike, and almost at the same instant, Buckskin and his four friends whipped out their revolvers; there was a flash of five tongues of fire, a sudden pent-up crash of firearms mingled with yells, groans and the fall of human bodies.

CHAPTER II.

A QUEER OLD CUSTOMER.

QUICK almost as the lightning's flash, the five whites had drawn their revolvers and fired, and with the crash of their weapons four of the savages sunk down lifeless, while the other two, terror-stricken, leaped through the open door and darted away into the timber like frightened deer. Little Buckskin followed them a few paces outside, sent a shot or two after them and then went back to the cabin.

"Well, boys, them red-skins corked themselves, didn't they?" the lad said, with an air of triumph.

"I should say they had made a big mistake," replied Malvern; "and I declare it turned out better than I had dared to hope for—not one of us even scratched."

"We got a splendid scald on that surprise-party," exclaimed Buckskin. "I was afraid we wouldn't all catch on together, but soon as you spoke I seen you'd the idea. Boys, you get in like old Bunker Hill veterans. Say, now, how is this for a reception at Lone Lodge?"

"I rather regard it as a kind of surprise-party, though I suppose it is another custom of the border," replied Malvern.

"Boys, true as I live, I never raised my hand against a Ingin until yesterday," declared the young plainsman. "I never had any desire to take human life—no, nor that of a beast or bird unless it was necessary. But I see very clearly now that I've got my foot into an Ingin ruction, an' there's goin' to be more blood spilt before the thing's settled. But, boys, we've got to remove them dead pilgrims and make some kind of 'rangements for the night. Them two that escaped may return with the hull Cheyenne nation and pester us considerable. Say, thar's an old open cache out here, and we'll jist drop those bodies into that and shovel some dirt over 'em, an' that'll be doin' the square thing by them."

So saying, they began the removal of the dead. Three bodies had been carried out and placed in the old cache. The fourth savage was the one that had first made his presence in the cabin known—he who had stood in the doorway of the partition and had precipitated the conflict by raising his tomahawk. He had fallen back into the adjacent room, and lay stretched at full length on his back.

Four of the whites lifted the body and started for the hole. They had passed out at the cabin door and were approaching the cache, when the form of the savage suddenly became possessed of life, and with a violent writhing of the body, tore loose from the grasp of the pall-bearers, fell to the ground, and then rising to a sitting posture, looked up into the faces of the boys, and, in a serio-comic tone, said, in good English:

"I kick on this business."

"A white man, by the great Scott!" exclaimed Rollins.

"A renegade, and a sweet bird he is!" added Little Buckskin.

The Indian burst into a peal of rollicking laughter.

"Say, old rosewood," cried Buckskin, "you've corked yourself, haven't you?"

"I'm opposed to any sich proceedings as this," repeated the renegade, swinging his long arms in the air; "if I can't have decent burial I don't want any. Do you young vandals think I'm goin' to be chucked into a hole like that with them pizen red-skins?"

"Birds of a feather ought to be buried together," decided Buckskin.

"Say, Bucksie, boy," retorted the renegade, turning and shaking his long, bony finger in the boy's face, "you're a tender youth with a fucher before you, but you want to feel your way keerfully, or you'll be cut off in your prime. Now you think I'm dead, don't you? You expected to cram me into that hole with them Ingins, didn't you? You supposed a bullet had done its gory work for me—you think I'm wounded—that I'm chantin' my death-song—but I'm not."

"I ruther think you're a jim-jammed renegade that's tryin' to possum out of a bad job," responded Little Buckskin.

"I deny the allegation—I demur—I kick!" replied the renegade; "but say, do any of you folks chew tobakker?"

"What monumental cheek!" exclaimed Buckskin.

"It's all right; I don't chew; but I must have a smoke," announced the renegade, and with the utmost coolness the queer customer took from an inner pocket in his calico shirt an old pipe and bag of tobacco, filled and lit the pipe and began puffing away, ever and anon removing the stem from his lips and blowing little rings of smoke into the air, at the same time winking ludicrously at the astonished Buckskin and his companions.

Such an exhibition of deliberate impudence was both amusing and exasperating, but finally it occurred to the young hunter that his performances might only be for the purpose of gaining time sufficient to enable the two red-skins who had escaped to return with succor, and so he made up his mind to bring matters to a close, and said:

"See here, you lambasted old rooster, I think we'll have to serve you as we did them other three Ingins and git rid o' you."

"Oh, now, Bucksie," protested the renegade, "I see you're gittin' in earnest, and I'll bet you my scalp against a square meal o' roast venison, jerked buffalo and corn-pone, that I killed as many o' them Ingin accordin to my number as you fellers."

"What you tryin' to give us now?" asked Buckskin.

"Bible facts, my kid! If you'll examine them three Ingins' heads you'll find one o' them

bu'sted behind! You can have my scalp if it isn't so."

"All right: I'll look about that," declared Buckskin, and turning, he leaped down into the pit. True enough the head of one of the savages was split to the neck! No other mark of violence was upon him.

"By the 'lasting torment! there is a bu'sted-head Ingin there!" he exclaimed, as he came back; "so you're a double-gear'd traitor, eh?"

"Boy, you're onreasonable," responded the renegade; "hearken to the voice of Long Gourd, the Cheyenne brave, and he will tell you why he slew that Cheyenne. Three long months ago I entered the village o' the Cheyennes and made known my burnin' desire to become an Ingin warrior. The tribe of Spotted Elk was runnin' down at the heel pretty badly, so they were only too glad to adopt a few bloody warriors, and I was admitted. They put me through a solemn ceremony, painted me and dressed me, and ended the ceremony by namin' me Long Gourd. If I do say it myself, I made a handsome, dashin' warrior—"

"Oh, boys!" interrupted Buckskin; "hear that! It breaks my heart."

"Keep quiet till I git through, will ye! or ye might git yer head broke," warned the mock Indian, a broad smile overspreading his paint-bedaubed face. "As I war gorin' to say, my splendid appearance had its effect on the fair sex o' the village, and it wa'n't long till I see'd I'd made a mash on Clinging Vine, the royal princess o' the tribe. Now, it happened that Stump-Tail Bear, that Ingin with the bu'sted noggin' in that hole right there, had long been sweet on Vine, the princess, and so he got jealous o' me, and three times has he tried to kill me. I knew one or the t'other 'd have to go under, and to-day when volunteers war called for to come here, and capture the Little Buckskin, Stump-Tail war the first to volunteer, and soon as I found he war comin' I volunteered, too, determined to lay him out the fu'st chance I got. That chance I found when we braves stood face to face with you folks. When I see'd that you war to shoot when the fu'st hatchet was raised, I raised the hatchet and fetched Stump-Tail one, and then dropped before your revolvers cracked. And I lay still for fear while you fellers were hot-excited you'd baste me. Now you've my story. In other words—in the classic language o' the red-man—Long Gourd has spoken."

"And I think," added Buckskin, "that Long Gourd has lied. I'll bet you killed your friend accidentally. But we've talked long enough about this. It'll soon be night, and we've got to bring up our horses, boys, or the sneakin' Ingins 'll be sure to steal them before morning. Bob, if you'll walk old Long Gourd into the cabin and hold a pistol at his head till we git back, the rest of us 'll get in the horses."

"All right," assented Bob, drawing his revolver; "about, face, Mr. Gourd! Forward, march!"

Turning with the most respectful obedience, the renegade marched with a lofty, military step into the cabin. Then, facing Bob, who had taken a position in the door, he said, in a tone entirely different from that in which he had hitherto spoken:

"Young man, I'll be bumfusticated if I ar'n't surprised at that boy, Buckskin. He's sharp as a cactus, but my paint and feathers are too thick for him. Say, while he's gone I'm goin' to wash off this dirt and change my rig, and I'll bet you my interest in Jericho he'll go out around the house and kick himself when he sees me. Here's a pail of water, and here's a wash-basin that old Noah used in the Ark, and—here goes!"

So saying, he tore off his feathered head-gear, his bear-claw necklace, and his fanciful-figured calico shirt. Underneath the latter was a buckskin hunting-shirt, plain, but rather neat.

Filling the wash-basin, he began a vigorous rubbing of his face and neck, and in a few minutes the streaks and rings of dirt and paint had disappeared, revealing the natural features of the man. He used his discarded calico shirt for a towel, combed out his thin, scraggy locks with his fingers, donned a coon-skin cap that hung on a peg on the wall, and was then ready for the reception of Buckskin.

Bob Malvern would never have known or believed that the man now before him and Long Gourd were one and the same individual had he not seen him undergo the metamorphosis. He seemed all of six inches taller, more angular and ungainly, while the expression of his face had been wonderfully improved. There was a peculiar, merry twinkle in his small, gray eyes, and a bland smile surrounding his unusually large mouth.

In the course of ten minutes Buckskin and his friends re-entered the cabin.

The renegade advanced toward the young hunter, and putting out his hand, said:

"How d'ye do, my gallant Buckskin?"

"Kit Bandy, by the blessed stars!" burst from the lips of the boy, and he grasped the man's huge hand in both of his, and shook it warmly.

"Lord bless your old soul," he went on, "it melts my heart with joy to see you again. Boys—Bob, Deck, Clark, Fred—this is Old Kit Bandy, the noted border detective, the bravest that ever banged an Injin's scalp or pulled a gang of road-agents!"

CHAPTER III.

OLD KIT'S LAMENTATIONS.

THE amateur hunters had heard of the noted border detective and scout, Kit Bandy, before, and, rejoiced to meet him, each advanced and shook hands with him. While they were thus engaged, Little Buckskin glanced around the room, then quickly turning to Malvern, asked:

"Job, where's the renegade, Long Gourd?"

"There he is!" and Malvern pointed to the old detective.

A silence profound as death fell upon the party, but it lasted only for a moment, when Old Kit and Bob exploded in an outburst of laughter that fairly shook the cabin.

A look of disgust swept over the face of Little Buckskin, and turning to his friends, he said:

"Boys, kick me, will you?—kick me hard for a blind jackass! I feel faint. This is enough to break my heart."

"Ha! ha!" laughed Old Kit. "Bucksie, take it easy, for you're not the only feller I've foolish. No, sir; I've deceived haydoogins o' fellers that considered 'emselves smart Alexanders. I'm Old Deception hisself. I war born a deception—a boy, when a gal war wanted to make sunshine in the Bandy family. As an Injin I'm a success. Domestic infelicity drove me into the red-skin camp from the storms of a spirited wife. Boys, war any of you ever married? If not, heed the voice o' one speakin' from experience. We drank to the dregs from the connubial bowl, and carry a mark for every day of twenty years of married life. This sunflower here on my cheek is not a birthmark, boys. Oh, no! it's where my wife, Sabina Bandy, branded me with a hot shovel; and this Sierra Nevada range runnin' down the side o' my head is the scar where an iron poker did its gory work. Oh, I'm the relic of a past age—the downfall o' the Roman Empire, the ruins o' Babylon, the destruction o' Herculaneum! But, boys, don't let my lamentations distract your attention from the fact that dangers do you surround. The Cheyennes and the Utes are on their auricle, and the Little Buckskin's scalp is coveted by them."

"What has raised their ire all so sudden?" asked Buckskin.

"The encroachment of the miners on the Injin Territory are givin' them the cramps, and less Uncle Sam interferes soon there'll be white blood spilt. I've been watchin' for a chance these many days to flee from my adopted friends."

"What ever possessed you in going there in the first place?" asked Deck Rollins.

"I sought the Injin camp from the persecutions of my wife, Sabina," was the old detective's evasive reply. "I went there to recruit my health. Oh, if you could 'a' seen me the day I entered that village! I war a storm-racked pillar—scarred and seamed and twisted and wrenched out o' shape and plumb—a mosaic shed over one eye and a Grand Canyon o' the Arkansaw cut across my forehead. But, Buckskin, I'm hungry, and while I run out and reconnoiter a little, I wish you'd rattle up a stiff and substantial supper."

"All right, Kitsie," replied Buckskin Phil.

The old detective left the cabin, and the boy hunter proceeded to prepare supper for himself and friends.

By this time it was dark. Buckskin lit a tallow dip, and raking the ashes from a bed of coals in the fireplace at one end of the cabin, put on some fuel and fanned it into a blaze.

It did not take him long to prepare the meal. He had coffee, corn-pone baked in an oven on the hearth, broiled venison and chipped buffalo-meat—a repast which all enjoyed with the gusto of famished wolves.

After supper Old Kit lit his pipe, sat down on one side of the cabin, and turning to Buckskin, asked:

"Bucksie, have you ever see'd a woman since you war a kid?"

"I should say I had," replied Buckskin; "it

wasn't over three weeks ago that one stayed overnight here."

"You don't tell me!"

"Yes, she came along about dusk, accompanied by a little cunnin'-faced Mexican," the boy continued; "but the woman kept a veil over her face all the time and I never got to see it once. After she entered the cabin she went into that room and stayed there till her servant 'd brought up the hosses in the mornin' to depart. Then she came out veiled, gave me a dollar for their lodgin', mounted her horse and rode away toward the mountains. She acted most dashed queer, I can tell you."

"Maybe it was a man in disguise," suggested Deck Rollins.

"No, it was a woman—her form and voice and hands—all indicated that."

"By the horn of Joshua!" exclaimed Old Kit, "I'll bet it was my wife, Sabina, huntin' me. Did she seem to appear to have blood in her eye?"

"She was very quiet and meek."

"Oh, Lord! that must 'a' been her—that meekness is one o' Sabina's walk-into-my-parlor games."

"Kit, I'm thinkin' you do your wife injustice," averred Buckskin.

"You do, eh? Boy, by the horn that Joshua blew! I can't do her justice. Let me tell you of one of her little love-tricks—one that she played on me afore we'd been wedded a year. It war when we lived in California on the Yuba. She got jealous o' me and Sarah Ann Forgot, the Idyl o' Roarin' Gulch, and the solemn fact is, I only danced with her sixteen times in one night, drank a bumper or two with her, and licked two Mexicans for callin' her a sorrel-topped angel—nothin' more'n any gentleman 'd 'a' done for her. But Sabina thought I overshot the mark—that in payin' so much attention to the Idyl, I neglected her, and when we got home she undertook to make me promise that I'd never, never speak to Sarah Ann again; but I laughed, coquettish-like, and that's all I'd say. So she swallowed her grief and became quiet and meek, but little did I dream what that portended for me."

"Wal, several days went by, and one bright, warm afternoon I took a big Injin blanket and went out under the shades o' the murmurin' pines and spread my blanket on the green, flower-bedded grass on the bank of the Yuba. The birds sung above me, the breezes dashed the perfume o' flowers around me. The river sung a low, sweet melody, and with my senses overcome by these intoxicants of nature, I fell asleep and slept like a bear up for the winter. And while thus I slept, and the birds sung, and the breezes blew, and the river glided, singin', to the sea, Sabina—my wife—the meek and quiet angel o' my bosom, came to where I lay. She carried a fifty-pound rock, which she laid at my feet. I expect the angels in glory applauded her, thinkin' it was an act of lovin', wifely devotion to her sleepin' lord; but if they did I reckon they soon seen they were mistaken, for Bina at once produced a big needle threaded with cat-gut fiddle-strings, brought the edges of the blanket on which I reposed together, and sowed me up in the blanket with that big stone at my feet. Then the little birds near saw her fasten a lariat to the bag over my head, and, holding on to the lariat, she rolled me over the bank of the river that ran singin' to the sea. Of course I woke up 'bout the time I tetched the water, and felt myself bein' dragged down into the cold depths of the river. I tried to cry out—free myself, but I war helpless. I could not realize what war wrong. Death war seizin' upon me, and I war 'bout gone, when I felt myself yanked up to the surface and partly out o' the water. I spluttered and coughed the water from my lungs, an' war nearly in speakin' order, when I heard a voice—the voice of mine own Sabina, shriek out:

"'Flirt with another sorrel-topped Idyl, will you, you false-hearted monster? Violate your marriage vows again, will you?"

"I was 'bout to answer when she let the rope slack, and down into the cold depth of that river I war dragged by that stone at my feet. I'd give myself up as lost, when again I war pulled to the surface, and when I war nearly ready to speak out the best I could, that woman yelled out: 'Will you promise?' I tried to answer 'Yes,' but before I could get breath enough down I went ag'in; and fourteen times war I thus dragged down and then up before I could gasp out 'Yes,' to her 'Will you promise?' And when she heard me the hearless woman said: 'Now repeat after me these words: "I, Kit Bandy, do promise and declare—that I will never flirt—with—any other woman—but—my own wedded wife—and—that I will always be

true to her in word and thought—so—help me, Lord!"

"After I'd repeated this promise to her she trolled me down the river to where the bank was low, dragged me ashore, ripped open the blanket, and I arose a wetter and wiser man, and then Sabina turned and went smiling to the cabin, and the birds in the tree-tops held a matinee, and the breezes sung 'Home, Sweet Home,' and the river ran on—well, boys, to cut it short, thar war one less darned fool in the Yuba valley that night, and those fool war Ka-ristopher Kolumbus Bandy."

A roar of laughter followed the conclusion of the eccentric old man's ridiculous story.

"That story, Kit," said Buckskin Phil, "is enough to break one's heart. Poor old man, I weep for you."

"Oh, pshaw!" exclaimed Bandy, "that little affair war just the beginnin' o' our wedded life. I'll tell you—"

The old man's words were here cut short by a sound that came in through the open door, causing all to start with sudden alarm.

Grasping his revolver, Little Buckskin sprang to the open door, and peered out into the now deep shadows of night. As he did so, a wild, terrified scream pierced through the darkness.

"By the horn o' Joshua!" cried Old Kit, his face assuming a startled look; "boys, something's wrong! that was a woman's scream beyond a doubt."

There was a momentary silence.

The sound of flying footsteps were heard approaching the cabin.

The next moment a human form, the form of a woman, glided across the threshold into the cabin—threw up her hands, uttered a low, terrified cry, and sunk senseless to the floor.

Kit Bandy sprang forward, and lifting the woman's head, supported it upon his arm.

The face of the stranger was that of a fair and lovely girl. At sight of it Bob Malvern uttered a low cry, as if of keenest agony, and clutching at his brow, he staggered back, almost falling. He recognized the face of the girl. It was that of his sweetheart—a face that had never been absent from his heart during a wakeful hour of the past two years—it was the face of *Augusta Darre!*

CHAPTER IV.

STARTLING NEWS.

To Bob Malvern's friends Augusta Darre was unknown, and they were not a little surprised by the startled expression of the young man at sight of the beautiful stranger's face.

"Bob," said Dick Rollins, "what is the matter? What do you know about this girl?"

"I know her—she is a friend of mine," replied Malvern; then advancing, he knelt by the side of the old detective, inquiring: "Kit, is she dead?"

"Not quite—only fainted," Old Kit answered. "The poor thing! I wonder what's gone wrong? Buckskin, you'd better slip out and throw eye and ear wide open, fer I tell you there's something in the wind."

Little Buckskin glided from the cabin into the night to reconnoiter the surrounding woods.

"Bob," demanded Bandy, "do you know whar this gal belongs?"

"Her home is hundreds of miles from here—in Kentucky. Her name is Augusta Darre."

"Darre, did you say?" suddenly exclaimed Old Kit; "not the darter o' Colonel Zebulon Darre?"

"Yes, sir," replied Malvern; "the same. Do you know the man?"

"I've hearn o' him," curtly replied Bandy; "but let's lay the poor gal on that couch."

Tenderly they lifted the unconscious girl and laid her on the pallet of skins in the corner, where, under the tender care of Old Kit, she ere long returned to consciousness.

Bob Malvern stood aside after requesting the old man to gently break to her the news of his being present.

Rising to a sitting posture and gazing wildly around her, the girl cried out:

"Where am I? where is Jeannette?"

"You're safe, my little lady," assured Old Kit, kindly. "You're safe with friends in the cabin o' Buckskin Phil."

"And Jeannette—is she safe, too?" repeated the maiden.

"Where did you leave her, Augusta?" asked Bandy.

"Ah! you know my name?" exclaimed the girl, in evident surprise.

"Yes, a friend of yours is here—an old friend. Do you know Robert Malvern?"

"Robert Malvern! He here?" she exclaimed, springing to her feet.

"Yes, Augusta, I am here!" and Bob Malvern stood before her.

A cry, half-joy and half-anguish, burst from the maiden's lips, and the next moment she was clasped in her lover's arms.

Malvern's friends and Old Kit looked upon this meeting with astonishment. Not one of them knew the relations that had existed between these two.

It was several moments before any one spoke. Bob Malvern was the first to break the silence.

"Gusta, in Heaven's name, how came you here? What is wrong?"

"Everything, Robert—everything!" the girl half-sobbed. "My father, if not dead, is in the hands of foes, and poor little Jeannette Zane must be in the hands of the savages that pursued us."

"Then you fled here from Indians, eh?" observed Old Kit.

"We were pursued," Augusta said. "I will tell you all so that you may fully understand the situation: Father and I were visiting at Zane's Ranch—in fact have been there three weeks. Father's health has not been very good the past year, and the doctor advised him to come West and spend a few weeks in the climate of Colorado. Rufus Zane was father's old friend, so we went there. Our visit has been a very pleasant one until to-day. Father had been in the habit of riding out every morning, and was usually accompanied by one of Mr. Zane's men, if not by Mr. Zane himself, or by myself and Jeannette Zane. This morning he rode out as usual with one of the ranchmen. Shortly after he left, Jeannette and I saddled our ponies and started on a ramble up the river. Five miles from the ranch we came upon the body of the ranchman, wounded unto death. He could just speak above a whisper. Brave little Jeannette dismounted, and, kneeling by his side, learned from him that four masked men had attacked them, and after shooting him carried father off toward the mountains, a prisoner. The ranchman bade us ride back to the ranch for help to pursue the outlaws, and we started at once. As we neared the ranch we heard yells and the firing of guns, and presently came in sight of many Indians on the plain and hills surrounding the ranch, and knew they were trying to capture the place. To venture forward we knew would be dangerous, and so Jeannette said we had better flee to the cabin of Buckskin Phil, and we at once started. On our way we stopped to see the wounded ranchman and help him to a place of safety, but he was dead when we got back to where he was. So we rode on fast as our ponies could travel. It was a long, long journey, and toward evening Jeannette's pony began to fail. The cabin of Little Buckskin was still several miles away, my friend said, when darkness fell. We rode on as fast as we could, and suddenly discovered that we were being pursued by horsemen, whom Jeannette said were Indians. We lashed our ponies into a gallop and rode for our lives; but Jeannette's pony was so near given out that when the light in this cabin burst on our gaze the pursuers were close upon us. I had held my pony back so that I could remain by Jeannette, but when she saw that we would be overtaken, the brave girl told me to go on and send Little Buckskin to her assistance. I dashed on toward the light, but before I had gone far I heard my friend's scream and knew that the Indians had overtaken her. After that I have a vague remembrance of leaping from my pony and running toward the light that shone through the open door of the cabin that my friend had said was Little Buckskin's."

"This is the home of Little Buckskin, my dear," added Malvern; "you fell in a swoon as you entered the door. Your friend must have been captured. Bandy, ought we not to call in the boy and tell him of the state of affairs?"

"By all means," replied Old Kit; "I'll go and whistle him up."

The old man went out and soon returned with the young plains guide.

Bob Malvern briefly related the news that Augusta had brought and when the youth heard of Jeannette's supposed capture, his young heart seemed almost crushed.

"Friends," he said, in a voice full of emotion, "I will go at once in search of Jeannette, if you will stay and take care of this young lady. The valley is swarming with red-skins. You will have to be careful, and maybe do some lively fightin'."

"Boy, what can you do to'ard rescuin' that gal alone?" demanded Bandy.

"I can do as much, or more than all of us, for it will only be by stratagem that she can be res-

cued, and more than one might make a blunder that'd defeat all my plans."

"Yes, yes, I know how that is, boy, myself," returned Bandy; "but we'll hold the fort till you return. We've somethin' now to fight for besides our own lives, and we'll drench this valley 'ith blood afore harm shall come to this gal. I'm a hull jungle full o' tigers when it comes to fightin' for a purty gal, notwithstandin' domestic infelicity has made me a storm-scarred monument to a once— But, no matter, Bucksie; I know you'll be keeful, and my best wishes for your success goes with you."

Taking a pair of revolvers, the youth bade his young friends good-by, and left the cabin. Old Kit went out with him to stand guard. A faint, far-off sound fell upon their ears as they stepped out into the darkness.

"What war that, Bucksie? Sounded like thunder."

"It was thunder, Kit; I not only heard the thunder when I was out before, but saw faint glimmerings of lightning reflected up from behind the mountain range. I guess we're goin' to have a storm. The air's felt like it for a week or more, and if—"

"Hark!" interrupted Kit.

They listened. The sound of hoof-strokes were heard out in the timber, going south.

"By the horn o' Joshua! the red devils are stealin' our hosses, boy!"

"Ay! they have stolen them, Kit," replied the boy. "Hear! they're goin' down the river! They're making for Buffalo Ford, an' I'll see if I can't head 'em off. Kit, watch things closely. Them boys in the cabin are brave and noble fellows, but they know nothing of the border and such dangers as now surround us."

With this precaution the boy glided away in the darkness, going down the Arkansas.

Like a deer he sped along with an almost noiseless tread. It was two miles to the crossing, and although he made the distance in a few minutes, he was not in time to head off the thieves. They were just disappearing on the opposite shore as he came in sight of the ford.

The moon was shining, yet he was unable to ascertain the number of the savages in charge of the horses; but, determined not to lose his noble horse without another effort to rescue him, he ran back up the river a short distance to where he had beached an old dug-out that he kept for his own use, and dragging the clumsy canoe into the water, he pushed out for the opposite shore. In a few minutes he had landed on that side, and at once struck out on the trail of the red scavengers.

He knew every foot of the country for twenty miles around, and that the trail taken by the savages trended away into the hills, narrowing from a wooded valley into a deep, black canyon. This knowledge of the country enabled him to take some advantages of the Indians by cutting "across lots," and before he was aware of the fact himself, he discovered that he was in ahead of the foe. He also discovered that his and the amateurs' horses were not all that the foe had in charge, but that there were fully two hundred head in the drove!

This discovery convinced the boy that the savages had raided the horse ranch of Rufus Zane. To attempt to retake them he knew would be the sheerest folly, for he felt satisfied that there was a large force of Indians in charge. But, he was determined to have his own horse, and so hurried on in advance of the drove, trying to devise some means by which his object could be accomplished.

In the mean time the air was growing more humid. A dark line of clouds had pushed up above the mountain range along whose serrated edges sheet lightning played incessantly. The low thunders growled ominously among the mountains.

Keeping on in advance of the horses, Buckskin finally entered the canyon. A shudder passed over him as he thought of the dangers to be encountered from the sudden bursting of the storm and the flood that might be hurled into the narrow rift. The same thought seemed to have filled the minds of the red-skins, for their voices were plainly distinct urging forward the horses. Buckskin heard them come thundering up the pass, that was now not over twenty feet in width, and instantly a thought seemed to have entered his mind.

Crouching like a panther in the shadows he awaited the approach of the foremost horse. Like a deer it came sweeping along, and when opposite the boy he sprang out like a cat from his concealment and seized the animal by the mane.

With a wild snort the beast plunged forward, dragging the young dare-devil at its side. It

was an unbroke mustang mare, spirited and vicious. It made a series of frantic lunges in its mad endeavors to rid itself of its burden, but, instead of freeing itself from the boy's grasp, it suddenly found him upon its back, where he had landed by a spring such as can be accomplished only by the most daring and skillful horseman.

The animal now became frantic, and plunged forward with renewed speed, over and anon rearing straight into the air and striking out viciously with its fore-feet and uttering a sound that was almost a maddened scream.

Finding its efforts to dislodge its rider unavailing the wild horse finally settled down to a steady run. Swift as a deer it glided along the canyon gaining upon the rest of the drove at every bound, the Boy Centaur clinging to its back as though he were a part of it. On through the pass, now lit up with the glare of lightning—now black in gloom, sped the unbridled beast with its daring rider, while on behind came the others, the roar of their clattering hoofs almost rivaling that of the thunder that rolled overhead.

Deeper and deeper the canyon grew, and this Little Buckskin knew would continue for miles before an exit could be made. The further he advanced into the hills the more dangerous the boy knew the way would become, but he was anxious to reach a certain spot where he hoped to stop the flight of the horses by blockading the passage. It was a place where a good-sized opening gradually narrowed to a rift where but two or three horses could pass abreast.

As he approached this place he threw himself forward upon his pony's neck, and clasped his hands over its nostrils to bring it to a stop. But there was no need of that, for at the same moment a stream of hot blood burst from each of the animal's nostrils, it slackened its pace, staggered, fell to its knees and then sunk down a quivering heap!

Little Buckskin sprang from the pony as it went down and ran on and entered the mouth of the narrow passage he had been endeavoring to reach, and pressing his form into a niche in the wall, he drew his revolver determined to block the way with dead horses!

The head of the flying drove so glided into the opening beyond, and side by side three of them dashed on and plunged into the passage where they became wedged as tightly as though driven there by a mighty thunderbolt.

The beasts began a desperate struggle, but before they could extricate themselves, Buckskin ran forward and shot each of them dead. The poor brutes were so firmly wedged in between the walls of the canyon, that they could not fall even when dead. Their heads drooped forward and their hind quarters sunk slightly. Horses coming up behind endeavored to leap clear over the dead ones, and two or three of them would have succeeded but for the revolver of Little Buckskin. Thus were other carcasses piled upon the three, making the blockade of the canyon complete.

In a few moments the whole drove was corraled in the pass. Yells and shouts that seemed to issue from a hundred savage throats, endeavored to force the horses forward. The animals became fairly wedged between the adamant walls. They crowded and fought, and reared and plunged. At times a more active one seemed to climb upon the very backs of the others, lunge forward, and then sink down again in the mad vortex.

Little Buckskin calmly climbed upon the dead carcasses that closed the pass, and looked down over the seething caldron of animals to which the glare of the lightning lent a frightful aspect.

Fully twenty rods separated the boy from the savages, and a smile passed over his face when he saw that it would be impossible for the foe to make their way through that solid mass of plunging beasts; nor could they scale the perpendicular walls of the canyon and come in upon him from the rear.

"Oh, small-pox take you!" the young dare-devil exclaimed. "I'll stay here till you yell your fangs sore. If any of these hosses leave here, they've got to go the other way. Ha! ha! I wish Old Kit was here now! I'm old Leonidas hisself, holding the pass—"

His musings were here interrupted by a yell in the pass above him, and looking around he saw in the glare of the lightning fully a dozen savages coming toward him.

How they had come there he could not imagine, nor did he stop to inquire, for he had not a moment to lose. The savages had seen him, and like coyotes dashed toward him.

Turning, the boy leaped from where he stood

upon a dead horse to the back of the nearest living one. The animal attempted to shake off its burden, but it was so hampered and crowded that its efforts were but feeble.

The savages coming down the canyon, uttered a fierce yell, and were answered by those below.

The situation of Little Buckskin was indeed critical, but never at a loss for an expedient, the boy rose to his feet on the back of the pony, bounded over onto the back of another, and thus ran several rods down the canyon over the backs of the surging, seething mass, finally dropping astride of a mustang to await the lightning's flash, in hopes of picking out his own horse from among the maddened drove of ponies. He had not long to wait. A prolonged flash of lightning that fairly dazed the boy at first, lit up the defile. He glanced around him, and quickly espied his own horse further down the canyon, towering up like a giant above the ponies.

Springing to his feet, the lad started toward him—again walking, crawling, and leaping along over the backs of the animals. He was but a few paces from his horse when he was suddenly startled by the presence of a lithe Indian warrior, who, with the agility of a panther, came bounding along over the backs of the ponies toward him, the look of a triumphant demon upon his face. There was no chance for the boy to elude him—no time to draw a weapon, but, standing erect, Little Buckskin grappled with the warrior in a hand-to-hand death-struggle there upon the very back of that seething whirlpool of maddened, terrified horses.

And at this very moment a vivid tongue of fire shot down into the canyon from out of the black-browed heavens, a peal of terrific thunder shook the very hills, and then an awful, blinding darkness settled over all.

CHAPTER V.

A BRAVE BOY'S DESPERATE DEED.

BOB MALVERN and Augusta Darre sat down in the humble cabin, and entered into conversation, the other three amateurs having joined Old Kit on the outside.

"Augusta, this is rather an unexpected meeting."

Robert thus opened the way for explanation and the information he was heart-sick to obtain.

"Yes, Robert," replied Augusta, "and under circumstances far more trying than was our parting two years ago. Oh! how sad I was that day! And what weeks and months of grief I have passed through since then! If I could only have heard from you, Robert, perhaps I should have been happier; but I have virtually been kept a prisoner until we started West. Paul Dumont has been away from Kentucky most of the time since you left; but the time for our marriage has been fixed three months hence."

"Indeed? Then your father is unrelenting?"

"He is a strange man, Robert," the maiden replied; "but poor father! I am afraid something dreadful has befallen him."

"As soon as morning dawns, Augusta, search will be made for both him and the girl, Jeannette. In fact, I believe Little Buckskin is now off in the search for her."

"What a sweet, vivacious, yet daring girl Jeannette is," Augusta remarked. "She is but fifteen, yet a woman in form and a girl in spirit—the idol of Zane's Ranch. For years have the Zanes lived in the Arkansas valley, and yet this is the first time that dangers from the Indians have befallen them."

"This outbreak is rather a surprise to everybody," added Malvern. "Old Kit and Little Buckskin think it is caused by the encroachments of miners and ranchmen upon Indian territory, but it looks to me as though it was the result of fiendishness—the natural love of the red-skin for human blood. But, Augusta, your father is known to Kit Bandy, and when I mentioned his name a while ago the old detective manifested no little surprise."

"Indeed? I never heard father mention such a name."

At this juncture Clark Lewis and Fred Lawrence re-entered the cabin and announced to Bob the fact of the Indians having stolen their horses.

"Well, what next?" was the response. "Boys, it begins to look as though we were to be the hunted instead of the hunters."

"Yes; Old Kit says for us to keep the cabin door closed and our revolvers within reach."

"Where is the old dodger?"

"He and Deck are scouting around through the timber in hopes of finding that other young lady. He thinks she escaped the savages and is

hiding away in the darkness. Deck has frozen solid to the eccentric old codger—thinks he is immense."

"He may be a brave man, a shrewd detective, but he's a colossal liar," averred Lawrence, who had a bluff, outspoken way of expressing himself.

Meanwhile, Old Kit and young Rollins were moving cautiously through the sparse growth of timber which, at this point, lined the Arkansas. They worked their way down the river, the young amateur observing such a degree of skill and silence as to call forth a compliment from the keen old borderman.

They kept on down the stream until they had reached a point, within half a mile of the ford where the Indians crossed with the stolen horses when Old Kit suddenly stopped within the shadows, and pointing over toward a little island in the moonlit river, said:

"Look there, lad, do you see that, eh?"

The island in question was about twenty rods away. It was a long, narrow strip covered with low, dense bushes, with a rocky promontory rising a few feet above the water, at the lower extremity.

The objection to which Kit called the boy's attention was the shadowy form of an Indian who disappeared in the bushes just as he spoke.

"I see nothing but an island," was Deck's reply.

"By the horn o' Joshua! I see'd an Ingin slip into the bushes over there, and, jist like as not, there's haydoogins o' them concealed there waitin' for to do deviltry. And, jist like as anyway again, that gal Jeannette is there in their power."

"How are we going to find out?"

"Stay by 'em till they show their colors, or till this river freezes over. That's the way we can work it, lad. A man that's spent twenty years dodgin' the wrath o' a red-headed woman can't be outgeneraled by a smoke-skin—not much!"

"It looks as though there was going to be a heavy storm," suggested Deck, "and if there is, I should think the red-skins would want a better shelter than that island affords."

"It's goin' to storm, I should proclaimate, and if that gal's not on the island, I should like to see old Jove heave a thunderbolt into them bushes over there, and splatter them smoke-skins all over the commonwealth o' Colorado!"

Already the storm-clouds had advanced above the mountain range, black and ominous, and yet the moon was shining, and the whole of the eastern sky was clear. There was an incessant roll of thunder and flashing of lightning, yet Old Kit and Deck paid little attention to these until the moon became obscured, and a dense darkness followed. Then it was that they were only enabled to keep their watch upon the island by the occasional glare of the lightning; but this proved very unsatisfactory to Old Kit. Feeling certain that the presence even of a single Indian on the island was of sufficient importance to bear investigation, he resolved to remain at his post until the desired information was obtained.

For hours they continued their watch. The wind changed to the north, and blew damp and cold. Off in the distance they could hear a deep and sullen roar, like the mighty rush of waters, and as no rain had yet fallen, and that strange sound grew nearer, Old Kit finally sprang to his feet, saying:

"By the horn o' Joshua! that sound is surely the roar o' an advancing torrent! It's been rainin' awful up in the hills, or else a mighty water-spout has burst on the upper range, and has been discharged into the Arkansas. If so, you'll see this stream bank-full in less'n an hour."

"There's something coming, that's sure," was Rollins's decision.

"It's a torrent, boy; you can't fool me. Just listen! I tell you she's an old boomer! Keep yer eyes peeled—ah! there it comes, boy! an old ripper with a ten-foot header!"

True enough! In the lightning's glare young Rollins beheld a mighty wave extending from shore to shore, rolling down the river from above them. It came with fearful rapidity, bearing upon its breast great trees and logs, and swept past them with a roaring, rushing, crackling sound.

Old Kit and Deck involuntarily started back as it glided past them.

"Lord, but she's a roarer!" exclaimed the old adventurer. "D'ye hear that strange noise, lad? That's the cracklin' o' trees and logs, and even stones that she's grinding together—Moses!"

A gleam of lightning revealed to their gaze the river almost bank-full. The island before them was nearly submerged, and, as the noise

of the rushing torrent receded down the river, their ears were greeted by a wild cry—a shriek of despair coming from over the water.

"By the horn that started old Jericho!" cried Old Bandy, "that war that gal's scream, and it come from the island! The poor thing! I suspected that she might be there, but, what on God's earth can we do to save her?"

At this juncture the whole heavens seemed to burst into a blaze of fire. The mad, rushing river lay revealed to their gaze, and upon its bosom near the island, they saw half a dozen savage forms struggling around a long log canoe as they were being swept down the stream. And upon the rocky promontory jutting out from the lower end of the island, the two men saw a female form standing erect, her long hair floating in the wind, and her hands clasped over her breast.

Nor was she alone. A huge, shaggy animal sat upon its haunches upon the rock, scarcely ten feet from her. It was a bear that the flood had driven to the rock of refuge.

The woman stood at the very extremity of the point. The water was within two feet of the top of the rock and rapidly rising. A few minutes more and both she and the bear must be swept away.

The scene was indeed terrible. The vivid lightning's fiery tongues seemed to lick the very waters around the island, while deafening peals of thunder crashed overhead.

The bear, crouching at the woman's feet, snapped its white teeth at the lightning and slunk down at the sharp peals of thunder in abject terror. It paid no attention to the slender figure behind it, but, blinded by the lightning, and deafened by the thunder, it crouched there for several minutes, then rolled off into the flood and was swept away.

Rapidly the river rose until the woman seemed standing on the very surface of the stream.

Again and again she shrieked wildly for help.

"My God, boy!" finally exclaimed Old Kit, throwing aside his hat: "it'll be death to attempt to stem that flood; but, heaven knows, I can't die in a better cause! Boy, if I do go down in that flood, and you ever meet one Ichabod Flea, my old pard, tell him how I—"

"Look yonder, Kit! What does that mean?" suddenly interrupted Deck Rollins.

Down along the opposite shore of the river he saw a drove of animals flying like the wind.

"It's a drove o' horses!" cried Kit, "and, as sure as the Lord's my Judge, there is a rider on the back of one of them!"

The imperiled woman, too, saw the horseman, for, lifting her hands, she shrieked aloud for help.

The horseman heard her and drew rein, or rather stopped his horse by command, for neither bridle nor saddle was upon it.

"By the horn o' Joshua!" cried Old Kit, "that horseman is Little Buckskin! Hurrah for the Young Centaur! See! he turns up the river! He has discovered the girl on the rock!"

True enough, the horseman turned and galloped up the river. Twenty or thirty rods above the island he halted, turned, and then leaped his horse into the roaring, wild flood.

"Mighty heavens!" exclaimed Bandy, "the young dare-devil has plunged into the river and's swimmin' his hoss to the woman's rescue! May the Lord help the fearless boy!"

"The wild, reckless fellow! he'll never get out of that!" declared young Rollins, almost paralyzed by the scene before him.

As the horse and rider plunged into the mad river they sunk from sight under the waves. But soon the watchers on the bank saw them rise to the surface again, and strike out into the stream.

Gradually the current carried them down the river, but the Young Centaur, for he the daring horseman really was, had made ample calculations on this when he went back up the river.

On and on the horse struggled with its rider—now rising and falling amid the currents and waves—dodging among the floating debris—guided only by the hand of its rider that lay upon its mane.

In breathless awe and suspense Old Kit and young Rollins watch the struggle, amid the glaring light and blinding darkness that alternate upon the terrible scene.

Closer and closer to the shrieking girl the youth approaches. He is heard shouting some words of encouragement to her. He has now reached the island, whose location is only marked by the top of the shrubbery upon it. Now he is alongside the rock! Ten feet further and the girl will be reached.

But at this moment blinding darkness envelops the river.

A wild scream pierces the air.

Suddenly there came an intense glare of lightning, instantly followed by a clap of thunder that shook the very earth. Half-stunned by the shock, Old Kit and Deck reeled backward. A great bough came crashing down from overhead, and fell where they had stood, riven from the trunk by the lightning's bolt.

"By the horn that tooted under Jericho's walls!" exclaimed Old Kit, "that was a close call, boy. But, I wonder how goes the struggle with Buckskin?"

They walked back to the river-bank and gazed down over the seething waters, but nowhere upon the floor could they see horse, boy or maiden.

They ran along the shore and shouted the name of Buckskin, and fired a revolver. But all was silent, save the rush of the river and crash of thunders.

"It's all up with the boy," said Old Kit, sadly.

Still they continued on down the river, although all hope had died in their breasts.

The storm gradually receded in the distance and the intervals between the lightning's flash grew longer.

But a few drops of rain had fallen, save far up the river, and there the flood-gates of Heaven had been thrown wide open.

The continuous darkness finally put an end to Old Kit and Rollins's search for the boy and girl, and turning they wended their way back toward the cabin, and by the time the two weary scouts had reached the little log inclosure the moon was out again and all was quiet save the roar of the river hard by and the muttering of the storm in the distance.

"What news do you bring, Kit?" asked Bob Malvern, anxiously, as the two scouts entered the cabin.

"Sad news—nothin' but the very worst," was the old detective's reply, and then he sat down and gently broke to his friends the news of the sad fate of Little Buckskin and the girl Jeannette.

Sorrow bowed every head and tears dimmed every eye.

After a few moments of silence Bandy arose and walked to the door and looked out. The sound of a horse's hoofs fell upon his ears. It was approaching. A moment later a horseman drew up before the cabin. Old Kit threw the door wide open. The light within streamed out upon the horse and rider. A wild cry of joy then burst from Bandy's lips, for upon the horse sat Little Buckskin, the Boy Centaur, holding in his arms the half-inanimate form of Jeannette Zane!

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEATH POOL.

"BUCKSKIN lives! Buckskin lives!" shouted Kit Bandy, and his words falling upon the ears of his friends in the cabin, elicited ringing shouts from the lips of the young amateurs.

"Yes, Kitsie," replied the young hunter, "I managed to pull through red-skin ranks and roaring floods, and I not only got my good horse back, but I rescued Miss Jeannette. Here, lift her down, Kit; she's almost dead with terror and cold."

Tenderly the old man assisted the maiden to the ground and conducted her into the cabin where she was, with a cry of joy, clasped in the arms of Augusta Darre.

"Oh, Jeannette, my darling! I thank God you are safe! But, child, you are wringing wet."

"I have just come out of the river, Gusta," replied the dark-eyed beauty. "Buckskin, Phil rode in after me, and we had a terrible time of it before we escaped."

"Then the Indians overtook you?" asked Augusta.

"Yes, the dirty wretches caught me and took me in an old canoe over to a little island in the river, but the flood bounced them, I tell you, and when they had to scramble for their lives they left me to take care of myself; but I almost laughed, Gusta, when I saw a wave upset their canoe and spill them out into that awful flood. To escape the rush of the water I climbed upon a big rock, and don't you think a big bear climbed up after me, and I expect if he hadn't been afraid of the thunder and lightning, he and I'd have had trouble. He would snap at the lightning and strike at it, and then, when it would thunder, he would crouch down, and at last he slipped, I guess, and tumbled off into the swift-rushing water. Then you had ought to have heard me scream, Gusta!"

"I hear you, you little minx!" declared Old Kit, completely astounded at the child's calm-

ness of spirit and clearness of mind after what she had just passed through. "I hear you," continued Bandy, "and thought it was a young painter."

Jeannette burst into a peal of merry laughter, and, turning to Augusta, asked:

"Who is that queer old coon, Gusta?"

Augusta could not help smiling, and for an answer she gave the maiden a formal introduction to Old Kit, also to those of the amateurs who were present.

The old detective, and the boys, too, were delighted with the girl's pretty face, her sparkling eyes and childish figure. They saw at once that she was one of those rare types of girlhood in which are combined a wild, vivacious spirit, a kind, fearless heart and a quick, active brain—in short, a merry-hearted little madcap.

Little Buckskin secured his horse near by, and then entered the cabin, hatless and dripping wet.

"Here comes another drowned rat!" cried Old Kit, as the boy entered.

"Yes, I'm slightly moist, Kitsie, but I've been in some awful wet water lately."

"I should proclaimate, boy! I see'd the hull o' your wild ride up to the time you reached the rock on which that gal stood, and as I couldn't see anything of you after that, I supposed you'd gone down in the waves."

"Oh, but I had the worst time getting my horse away from the Ingins," Buckskin replied.

"I got in ahead of the reds and hurrying on to a narrow place in the canyon proceeded to block the way by shooting horses as they came up. After I got the drove stopped and closely packed into the canyon, down swept a lot of Ingins from above, and I had to scatter. I jumped over onto a pony and run along on the backs of the herd, for they were wedged in there so close that you couldn't have dropped a bullet to the ground. To my surprise I met an Ingini that come prancing over the drove from below, and, right there, we locked horns on the backs of them horses. Down we went, and it'd have made your heart break to see our heels twinkling round among them ponies. The critters got scared at the rumpus on their backs, and they made a lunge, a gap was made, and we two warriors leaked through to the ground. As luck 'd have it, a mustang drove a foot into the red-skin's stomach, and he curled up like a sick bear. Then I jumped to my feet, and after a few minutes' squeezing I got back onto a pony, crawled along over the herd, till I come to my own horse, which I dropped astride of, and then speaking to him he turned and waded through them ponies like a buffalo through mist. The whole drove followed; the blockade was broken, and away went the whole gang pell-mell, clatter-clatter, with a rush and a jump, down the canyon—over Ingins, over rocks, over brush—through the gloom—through the blaze of lightning—with the roar and bang of thunder to cheer them on. On we went, all together, till we reached the river, and until I heard Jeannette there, whispering for help, when I left the drove and set sail to her rescue and—Well, here we all are. I am sorry I didn't get your horses, Bob, but I done the best I could."

"Of course you did, Buckskin. Don't let the loss of our ponies trouble you, my brave boy," replied Malvern. "I think that you now deserve a little rest, both of body and mind."

"He's tougher nor a blacksnake whip," assured Old Kit; "but let him pass through a few years o' married life, with a screech-owl, and it won't be long till he will begin to look like an Aztec ruin. Give me a nest o' wild-cats, a grizle bear, a cyclone—anything but a struggle with a Sabina Bandy. Buckskin, take my advice and never git married—never fall in love with a gal!"

Buckskin's face flushed slightly at this and when he and Jeannette were seen to exchange glances, Bob Malvern discovered that the whimsical old detective was treading upon more sacred ground than he had supposed, or, in other words, that his advice had come too late! Buckskin loved Jeannette, for this was not the first time they had met. However, the young hunter accepted Kit's advice good-naturedly, and retired to the adjoining room to exchange his wet buckskin for a dry suit.

The room with a fire-place, with a roaring fire on the hearth, was given up to Augusta and Jeannette, when the latter proceeded to dry her clothing as well as circumstances would permit.

Old Kit, Little Buckskin and Bob Malvern finally sat down to discuss the situation. The abduction of Colonel Darre was the question that now came up. Little Buckskin and Bob Malvern expressed their opinions regarding the

matter quite freely. Old Kit listened to them until they were through, then said:

"Boys, I think you're both off your base—on a cold trail. I believe he has fallen into the hands of Utah Bill and his band of cut-throats. I am even now, boys—but mum's the word—in these parts lookin' up a case in which Colonel Zebulon Darre figures to a certain extent, and if I succeed you'll hear somethin' drap hefty like down in Old Kaintuck. But I never dreamed o' the colonel bein' up hereaways, and it may be dashed unfortunate for him that he is."

"I can't imagine what trouble he is involved in, Kit," remarked Malvern, not a little surprised by the old detective's words.

"Time will tell perhaps," answered Bandy. "I had a part o' the case pretty well worked up, but this new trouble may mix things up again. The fu'st thing we do we'd better see if we can't find the old man. But here arises another question: what'll we do with these two little gals? We can't leave 'em here; it won't do to send 'em home alone, and it'll work a great hardship on them to take them alo: g."

"I would suggest that the girls decide the matter themselves in the morning," was Malvern's proposition.

"That'll do," Old Kit assented.

The matter was thus settled, for the time being.

A close watch was kept over the cabin during the entire night.

At daylight the next morning two rancheros from Zane's Ranch arrived at the cabin in search of the missing girls and Colonel Darre.

They reported the country along the way clear of Indians, and after the situation had been fully discussed, the maidens concluded to return to the ranch with the rancheros, whom Jeannette knew to be brave and trusty men.

Little Buckskin gave them his horse to ride, for not one of the other horses had yet been recovered.

With many kind wishes for each other's safety, the maidens finally took leave of their gallant friends and lovers, and with the rancheros started down the valley.

In less than an hour afterward Old Kit, Little Buckskin, and the four amateurs were moving up the river toward the mountains.

The old detective had his reasons for believing that Colonel Darre had been carried off into the mountains by the followers of Utah Bill, and while he was ignorant of the exact whereabouts of the outlaw's stronghold, he was satisfied as to the course in which it lay.

Night found them far advanced into the hills.

They went into camp on the banks of the Arkansas. They passed the night in rest and quiet, and early the next morning resumed their journey.

They soon came to the mouth of a large creek, known at that time as Black Water, and as they could not cross it, Old Kit said:

"Boys, we'll have to foller this creek several miles afore we can cross, but it'll not be much outen our way, after all."

So they turned up the creek, and at noon stopped upon its banks to rest and partake of a cold dinner.

Up the stream could be heard a sullen roar of water, and, filled with curiosity, Bob Malvern said:

"Boys, I'm going to run up there and look at that waterfall while you fellows are eating, for I'm not at all hungry."

So he took up his rifle and departed. A few minutes' walk brought him to where the creek made an abrupt bend, and at this point he found—not a cascade, but a rapids, down which the water rushed with fearful velocity, and plunging against the rocky bank in the angle of the stream, rolled under itself, thus producing a continuous roll and boil of the angry waves that in the shadows seemed appalling. At sight of the mighty caldron, Bob Malvern started back and grasped the bough of a pine tree. The swift, swirling roll and boil of the flood was possessed of a horrible fascination that at first well-nigh overcame him and dragged him into its embrace.

Recovering his composure, Malvern gazed in wonder and amazement upon the water. He saw sticks, logs of wood, and even rocks rolled over and under in that continuous swirl of the flood, and suddenly the young hunter started, and a cry of horror burst from his lips, for he saw what he was certain was a human form thrown up by the undercurrent of the whirlpool, shot forward on the surface and again buried under the rolling waves!

For a minute Bob Malvern stood like one transfixed with horror. Had he really seen a human form? Had some unfortunate hunter or

miner been drawn by the mystic power of the whirlpool into its embrace and there held and tossed and toyed with as a cat does with a mouse?

These were the questions that revolved through the young man's mind, and the more he pondered them over, the stronger became his conviction that he was laboring under both a mental and an optical delusion. So he turned and walked away a few paces, passed his hand over his brow, and then laughed to himself to think that he had permitted the solitude of the place and the dizzy whirl and roar of the whirlpool to fill his mind with such horrible vagaries. And, to make sure that he had completely shaken off the spell, he turned and walked boldly back to the edge of the creek.

As he did so a human form standing upright, with one arm extended clutching a short stick, the eyes sunken and hollow, the bearded face ghastly, the hair and tattered garments dripping, rose half out of the water, and with the rapidity of the current advanced toward him a few feet, then it was quickly sucked downward by the undercurrent from sight, the extended hand seeming to strike out at him as the body disappeared. Nor was this all; a short, black log popped upward out of the water, fell with a loud splash and then disappeared, closely followed by a second lifeless human form whose throat was clutched in one hand as if in a death-struggle with itself.

Bob Malvern started anew with a shudder of horror. There was no mistaking the evidence of his senses now. The black whirlpool was a place of death—holding within its embrace the body of its victims, with which it seemed to play and sport with devilish delight.

Almost sick at heart the young man turned from the horrible scene, and began to retrace his steps, back to his friends.

He had gone but a few paces when the figure of a man glided from behind a rock and confronted him.

He stopped short and started back. The man before him was his rival and sworn enemy, Paul Dumont!

CHAPTER VIII.

A PAIR OF OLD SOAKS.

"PAUL DUMONT!" burst involuntarily from Bob Malvern's lips as he recognized the face of his rival and foe.

"The same, Bobby Malvern," replied the man, with a haughty sneer; "I know you are surprised to meet me here; and two years have not effaced from my memory the cowardly blows you once gave me."

"Paul Dumont, you deserved every blow," replied Malvern, all his old-time courage asserting itself, "and, if the truth was known, you ought to be hung. What are you doing here?"

"That is none of your business, Bob Malvern."

"Perhaps not, but the officers of justice may make it theirs."

"Do you mean to insinuate that my presence here, any more than yours, is evidence of wrong?"

"Want of respect for your honor makes me suspect you of everything vile."

"You impertinent scoundrel! You shall respect the power of my good right arm!" cried the man, advancing menacingly.

"Stand back, Paul Dumont," warned Bob, defiantly.

"Curse your hide," hissed Dumont, "your brute force will not keep you out of that Death Pool! I shall laugh with glee when I see your form chasing those of the villains already there—villains who were caught prowling through the hills like you, to steal, or rob, or murder. Bob Malvern, I command you to throw down that revolver and surrender!"

Bob laughed in the man's face.

A footstep sounded behind him. He turned his head, and as he did so received a blow from behind that felled him half-stunned to the earth.

Then he was pounced upon by four burly ruffians who had been concealed near, overpowered, disarmed and his hands securely bound.

"Paul Dumont, what cowardly work is this?" the young man demanded, as soon as he was able to speak.

"We're not cowards, young feller," spoke up one of the four, "but honest men that have a brave duty to perform in disposin' o' road-agents, thieves and claim-jumpers. We're members o' the Mountain Police, and we're bad, bad men to trifle with."

"I can prove my entire innocence," asserted Bob, "of any of the charges you name; I am here with a company of friends on a hunting expedition."

"You'll be given a fair and impartial trial sich as is guaranteed by the constitution o' the Mountain Police, and of the United States, and either set at liberty or chucked into the Death Pool," was the reply, given in a heartless tone that was full of devilish significance.

Bob had little faith in this professed character of the four strangers, and none at all in the honor of Paul Dumont. He could not imagine what the Kentuckian was doing there. It was the first intimation he had of his being away from his home, and it appeared to him as being very singular, if not mysterious, that not only he, but Colonel Darre and his daughter, should be there, in that country. What the presence of one had to do with the presence of the other he could not conceive, nor could he convince himself that it was wholly a coincidence.

That Dumont had influence or command over the four men Bob had not a doubt, and knowing him—Dumont—to be a coward at heart, he felt that but little mercy would be shown him under any circumstances.

Dumont finally took one of the men aside and talked to him in an undertone for a few moments; then he turned and went away.

The man came back, and said:

"Boys, we'll escort this young rambler up to the 'Bar,' and hold him for trial when our Associate Justice returns."

"All right; then, forward march, Mister Rambler!"

With their prisoner, the four "Mountain Police," as the fellows had styled themselves, set off toward the north. They moved along at as lively a pace as the rough and tortuous way would permit.

It was nearly night when they reached the "Bar," as they had termed their rendezvous. It was in a most dreary and desolate place, surrounded by great, pine-clad hills.

"Here, stranger, is the Bar o' Justice," announced one of Bob's captors, as they halted under a cluster of trees; "here the Mountain Police deal out justice to them as will transgress. The Judge, or his Associate, will be here, mebber, to-night, yet, and whenever he comes you'll get your trial."

"Trial!" sneered Bob; "what kind of a trial? Why have I been dragged away here from the friends by whom I could prove that I am but an amateur hunter here in these mountains? I can tell you: you mean to murder me to gratify that scoundrel, Paul Dumont!"

"Say, young man, you don't want ter git on any high hoss 'bout here, 'r you'll git yanked for contempt o' court," suggested one of the "police." "You want to understand that we're honest, and won't take sass from anybody; nor you don't want to be too hard on that feller you call Dumont, for he's a bad, bad man."

Night coming on a fire was lighted under the trees, for the mountain air was chilly.

Malvern, who had been bound to a tree, saw that the place was a general rendezvous, and had the appearance of a miner's camp, there being quite a number of picks and spades—also cooking utensils—scattered about. The men themselves were dressed as miners, but to Bob they had the appearance of villains.

One of the party, addressed as "Molly," proceeded to prepare supper. This did not take long, and after they had refreshed themselves, all took seats around the fire, and lighting their pipes began to smoke and talk.

Thus they had passed fully two hours, all the while wondering why the "Judge" did not come, when they were suddenly startled by a voice calling out in a sharp, falsetto tone:

"Hello, down there!"

Instantly the four "policemen" sprung to their feet and grasped their revolvers.

A few moments of silence followed.

"Hello, down there, I say!" again that voice piped out from the gloom.

"Who the thunder are you?" demanded "Molly."

"Why, don't you know me?" returned the voice.

"It's that 'darned old bummer from Whisky-Famine, Bill Losh," asseverated one of the men.

"Advance, you old sinner, and give the countersign!" shouted Molly.

"I'll do it with all my heart," responded the intruder, and the next moment a wretched-looking specimen of humanity made his appearance within the light.

His age was uncertain, for dissipation seemed to have left him a total wreck. He was rather under medium size, with a beardless face, a red, bulbous nose, and a complexion of mottled hues. His clothes were torn and dirty, his toes were protruding from his shoes, his hat was an

ancient affair, the rim being fastened up on each side and running to a peak, fore and aft.

Altogether Bill Losh, or Bummer Bill, as he was known to the "police," was a hard citizen whom the want of water and food, and a surfeit of jim-jams had reduced to a wretched vagabond.

"Hullo, Bill!" exclaimed one of the "police," "what in thunder ye doin' 'way over here?"

"Prospectin', by Jeerusa-lem!" was the old bummer's reply; "and darned glad I be to strike your camp. Say, got anything to drink?"

"Nothin' but water."

"Water? Oh, git away! D'ye think I want to fill up on sich stuff? It's too bulky—got no substance—no color, no backbone."

"And you say you're over here prospectin', eh?"

"You bet I be; I'd a dream t'other night—Hullo! who's this you got haltered up here?" and he noticed Malvern for the first time.

"Time'll tell; but go on with your dream."

"I dreamed that my fortune waited me in these 'ere hills, and somethin' whispered: 'Bummer Bill, you've laid 'round Whisky-Famine's saloons and drunk pizen, and lived like a pup long en' ugh; now git up and lunge out into the hills like a Texas steer, tear down the mountains like an 'arthquake and help yerself to the golden treasures.' Wal, I told my dream to a darned old spider-legged bummer that I used to know up to Leadville, named Shadrac Poppel, and who I shared my bed on the ground with often, and he begged me to take him in as a silent pard to carry my tools and cook and do the little drudgery of the camp. Boss old idiot that I was, I took Shadrac in. The good miners o' Whisky-Famine kindly furnished me tools, provisions and sich things as I needed, and told me to go, and if I ever showed my face in that camp ag'in afore I was wuth a million they'd never 'sociate with me ag'in. Old Shad thought they were darned glad to git rid o' me, but if they war they'll rue it, dash 'em, they will. But, away Shadrac Poppel and I went into the hills, s'archin for the vision o' my dream. At sunset to-night we camped under the brow o' a lofty hill. I eat my grub and laid down to dream, and when I awoke Shadrac was gone and so was the rifle and the last dollar that the Whisky-Famines had raised me. That infernal old bummer had stolen me blind and skipped, the Lord only knows whar; and so I pulled up and drifted down this way. Gentlemen, I hope you'll 'low me ground enough to sleep on and a little patch o' sky for kiver."

"Yes, certainly; we're only too glad to have you stay here," declared one of the "police." "I'm sorry Old Shadrac has disturbed your dream."

"So'm I," replied the old bummer, "and if ever I git my eyes on him, I'll lam the thief into mush. I'm a bad man when I git riled up, and—"

"Oh! yes; you're a daisy, a high-heeled prancer, ar'n't you, you old bilious liar?"

The last words issued from the lips of an unseen person in the shadows on the south side of the camp, but before the "police" had time to rise from their seats, a tall, ungainly man, fully as dilapidated as Bummer Bill, and even more homely, emerged from the bushes and approached the party, carrying an old, long-barreled rifle.

At sound of his voice Bob Malvern started. It sounded somewhat like the voice of Kit Bandy, and the size of the man corresponded with that of the old detective. His face, however, he could not see, for the man kept his back to him.

"Shadrac Poppel! by the blisterin' centipedes! That's him, boys—the old thievin' bummer from Leadville!" cried Old Bill, as the new-comer approached.

The four "policemen" quickly searched the man from head to foot, but seeing he was even a more harmless-looking individual than Old Bill, they relapsed into their repose on the earth, one of them saying:

"A fine pair of distinguished old bummers, sure."

"I reckon they were both kicked out of camp," said Molly aside to one of his friends, "for they've been threatenin' Old Bill for a week or more. He's only been in Whisky-Famine 'bout a month and's made himself an intolerable nuisance."

"Ya-as," drawled Poppel, straightening himself to his full hight, "I heard every blessed, blasted, blamed word you told 'bout your big dream, Bill Losh, and 'bout your takin' me into halvers with you, and 'bout me stealin' your things. Now, you old scorbutic falsifier, you're badly off your base. You've been outen your

old head ever since you took a drink of water to-day. I told you it'd throw you into spasms o' the brain. Gentlemen, that man, Old Bill—Old Bummer Bill, got up outen his bed to-night and wandered off here and lied to you."

"I told the truth, you old vagabond, and you know it!" retorted Old Bill; "there you stand with the very gun in your hand, you fanciful old liar."

"Let me have that rifle," demanded one of the "policemen," rising to his feet.

Shadrac Poppel passed the gun to the man, then threw off his hat, shoved up his sleeves, leaped into the air, and shaking his fist at Old Bill, exclaimed:

"You petrified old soaker, you've stirred up a bull litter o' tiger cats in me, and you've got to take water or get your nose scattered all over your face. I tell you I'm no thief, and while we war together I treated you like a lady, and—"

"Stop right there," interrupted Old Bill, throwing open his shirt collar and squaring off for fight.

Highly amused at the old bummer's wrath, and eager to see the fight that seemed inevitable, the four "policemen" arose to their feet.

"Come at me!" challenged Shadrac—"come, and I'll tie you all up in a cramp—I'll give you a jim-jam that'll jerk yer toe-nails off—come, rub ag'inst me, you old sun-dried goat, and I'll dissolve the partnership heretofore existin' twixt Poppel and Losh. Wooh! I'm mad—I'm on fire! Lord! if I had a revolver I'd make a sieve outen your carcass too quick! Give me a revolver, men—give me one quick before I bu'st!"

"And me one, too, if you want to see some fancy work," exclaimed Old Bill; "I'll riddle him from heels to head."

"Here! here! here! here!" exclaimed the four "police," and each of them lifted his revolver from his belt and handed it out to the old bummer, eager that they might exterminate each other.

Quickly the foes grabbed at the weapons, and with the haste and greediness of a hungry dog endeavoring to carry off two bones, the four revolvers were snatched out of the "policemen's" hands—each of the bummer getting two; then, as they simultaneously cocked them, Old Shadrac said:

"Pard, these fellers are most dashed anxious we should kill each other—see?"

"Yas, I see! So I says—'Hands up, gentlemen, please!' and Old Bill, turning, leveled each of the revolvers on a "policeman!"

"I calls too! Hands up!" added Shadrac, as he covered the other two men!

The four assumed "Mountain Police" started back aghast. In an instant they saw their blunder—that they had been deceived into giving their only weapons into the hands of two masquerading bummer.

Never were men so cunningly outwitted as were those four, and although they were two to one, they instantly saw in the changed voices, the blazing eyes and the fixed features of the assumed bummer, that they were confronted by two desperate men instead of two besotted vagabonds.

Bob Malvern's heart leaped into his throat, for he now discovered that the two pretended bummer were Kit Bandy, the Border Detective, and a pard.

The four outwitted men stood motionless, speechless, thunderstruck.

The two detectives stood as motionless, their fingers on the triggers of their revolvers, their eyes upon the foe.

"Oh, we hold a full hand, gentlemen," assured Old Kit, "and the fu'st one o' you that undertakes to kick 'll git his own medicine hypodermically injected into his system. Throw up your hands, gentlemen—up high—that's it! Now, you feller on the right advance and untie that youngster—go!"

The youngster started toward Malvern with a muttered curse. In passing a tree a thought struck him, and quick as a flash he sprang behind the trunk.

"Crack!" went Bandy's revolver, and the bark flew from the side of the pine, and a howl of pain burst from the "policeman's" lips. The tree was not large enough to cover the fellow's body, and a part of one arm being exposed received the shot.

"Come out from behind that, you scamp!" commanded Kit, and another shot chipped the bark from the side of the tree and grazed the fellow's arm again.

"Don't shoot! don't shoot!" howled the wounded man, appearing from his retreat.

"Do then as I bid you; untie that man!"

The fellow advanced and released Malvern. "Now fall into line, all four of you—quick! or by the horn o' old Joshua, I'll tumble your meat-houses."

The four miners fell into line with their hands raised above their heads.

"Now, Bob, will you proceed to search them four galoots?"

"With pleasure, my dear Doctor of Dudes," replied Malvern.

He found upon the "policemen's" persons some money, a supply of revolver cartridges and one derringer. In each one's boot was a long knife.

The detectives took possession of all these effects except the money, which was returned to the ruffians.

"Now," said Old Kit, after the search had been completed, "we ought to shoot every mother's son o' you for bein' outlaws—followers o' Utah Bill."

"We deny the charge," replied one of the men: "We are not outlaws, but Mountain Police, and—"

"Mountain Po—granny," interrupted Old Kit; "that's too crystal-like; don't talk to old boomers like us that way. But, as we've no desire to stain our hands with your blood, we'll let you off this time with the understandin' that if ever you're caught in these diggin's ag'in you'll be promptly handled. Good-night, my gay cavaliers!"

With this the old detectives lowered their revolvers and, turning, left the camp, followed by Malvern, who was not astonished at Old Kit letting the villains go.

Out in the shadows where they could see and yet not be seen, the trio halted, when Old Kit said:

"Bob, this Old Bummer Bill is my pard, Ichabod Flea, brave and handsome as they make 'em."

"Glad am I to meet you, Ichabod Flea, and I congratulate you upon your fancy performance. I enjoyed the *denouement* very much, I assure you."

"Yes, good thing, Kitsie, that we met just when we did," said Flea, "but then we've been in the habit of meeting at the right time these years and years."

"Where did you leave the boys, Kit?" asked Bob.

"Where you left us at noon; but when you failed to return at the right time, Deck Rollins and I went to look for you, and we caught sight o' you being promenaded off into the Hills. I told Deck to run back for the rest o' the boys and try and overtake me, but if they failed to do so to keep due north till they struck the Arkansas and there wait till I joined 'em. If the boys had only overtaken me we'd 'a' saved you a long walk, for them fellers are outlaws—followers of Utah Bill. But I reckon it is best as it is, for by watching them we may find out where Colonel Darre is concealed. That's why we didn't kill them on the spot, Robert."

"I am satisfied," declared Bob, "that those four fellows are the tools of a bitter enemy of mine, for that enemy I met to-day, and it was by his orders, I know, that I was brought here."

"Indeed? What's his name?" asked Bandy.

"Paul Dumont."

"Of Kaintucky?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you know him, eh?"

"I thrashed him the day I left Kentucky, two years ago," replied Bob, "and he holds no love for me for it."

"I should say no. But, boy, that's the very identical chap I am hunting down," observed Kit.

"I think those four fellows expect him here yet to-night, and we can get him."

"No, no; we don't want to pull him yet. It's supposed he's playing a double game, and that's what we're tryin' to git onto. And it may be that he's got into the move against him, which accounts for the disappearance of Colonel Darre."

"He and Darre are the best of friends," Bob averred.

"If Dumont is the villain he is suspected of being, he is no friend of the colonel's. But, Ichabod, you'd better remain here and watch those fellows, and see if our man does put in an appearance. I've an idea they've a secret hiding-place somewhars hereabouts. Bob and me'll return to our friends, and if you strike anything report to me at Whisky-Famine, forthwith."

"I'll do so, Kitsie."

"Well, good-night, Bummer Bill!"

"Good-night, Shadrac—good-night, Bob!"

And with this the men parted—Kit and Malvern hurrying away, leaving Ichabod Flea to watch the outlaws.

CHAPTER IX.

A VILLAIN'S DEED.

DOWN upon the placid bosom of the Arkansas river a small Indian canoe was floating at the will of the current. It contained a female occupant whose features and dress told that Indian blood coursed through her veins. She was a young woman—possibly not over two-and-twenty, and was possessed of no little symmetry of features for one of her race. Her head was bare, the braids of her long black hair hanging to her waist. She was richly, almost royally dressed in the varied and gorgeous colors so pleasing to the savage eye. She was seated upon a jaguar-skin, while at her feet lay a bundle of robes and blankets, all of which were neat and clean and in keeping with the air of Indian royalty that seemed to surround this lone voyager.

An anxious, eager look rested upon her face, and as her dark eyes swept either shore ever and anon, and then dropped to the bundle lying at her feet, something like a shadow of sorrow passed over her brow.

From whence came she? Whither was she going? There was no Indian village down the river, and those above were far away in the mountains.

Keeping in the middle of the stream she drifted slowly on, in and out of the sunshine and shadows that fell upon the waters. Birds sung on shore as she passed along, as if to cheer her in her loneliness, and now and then a mountain goat would look down with wonder from some distant cliff upon the creeping boat.

Finally the woman is startled by the barking of a dog, back some distance from the river.

She turns her eyes shoreward and listens. The barking of the dog continues. A faint smile passes over her dusky face. She takes up the paddle and turns the boat toward the shore.

With the ease and grace of one accustomed to the oar she handles the light blade. Rapidly the frail craft glides across the current and finally touches the shore.

Rising to her feet the woman steps out upon the beach, and taking up the boat's painter she ties it to a low, hanging limb. Then she turns and starts back from the river.

She had scarcely gone ten steps when she heard the sound of feet and lifting her eyes she beheld a white man coming toward her. At sight of him she uttered a cry, half of joy, half fear; then, with outstretched arms, streaming eyes and radiant face, she ran toward him crying out in good English:

"Oh, White Pine! My brave, my love!"

The man stopped, started back as if from an apparition, and seizing the woman by one of her hands, exclaimed:

"Heavens! June, what has brought you here?"

"My love! my love, White Pine!" cried the woman, distressed by the man's cold reception. Oh, why does White Pine not seem glad to see June?"

"I am astonished!" White Pine thundered. "How came you here, woman? Who brought you?"

"I came alone, down the long river, bringing in yonder canoe a message of love to my husband," she answered.

"I believe you are lying, June—I believe you've a pack of your Ute friends near to murder me!"

"No, no, no! White Pine thinks wrong of his wife. She would allow no harm to come to him. It is her love that brought her down the long river to meet him."

"How in thunder did you know I was here?"

"The little birds that sung to June when her hour was free—when she was queen in the great Ouray's camp—came again over the mountains, and in their songs told her where her White Pine was."

"Squaw!" exclaimed the man, "you are telling me a lie!"

"June's tongue is not crooked. She would not lie to her love!"

"Oh, the deuce! I'm sick of that—you sickened me long ago, June; I am no Indian, and I cannot love a squaw."

"But you did love June, and became her husband. You gave her many pretty things, and told her of the pale-face people, and sung to her like the birds, and her heart was happy. All the world seemed like sunshine and flowers and music to June, then; and if White Pine will go with me to my canoe I will show him that which

will make his heart glad and happy and rejoice that June has come to him."

"Squaw, I want nothing to do with you!" was the man's heartless response.

"Must June go back to her people alone?"

"I did not bring you here—go away—let me alone. If you cross my path again, I will kill you!" was White Pine's reply.

"Why has White Pine turned against his wife?"

"Go away—leave me!" he cried. "I must go."

He turned his back upon her and started off. With a sad cry she sprung forward and seized his arm, and with a wild, pleading look, cried out:

"Oh, let me go with you!"

The heartless wretch flung her aside, adding insult to injury. The woman clutched at her throat as if choking. A sob broke from her lips, her chest heaved, her eyes blazed, her white teeth shone between her lips. The woman had a spirit. A demon had been aroused in her heart.

"I will follow White Pine to his white friends," she now fairly hissed; "I will tell them of his treachery. He shall never whisper his love in another maiden's ear!"

"You threaten me, eh, you black wench!"

As he spoke, the villain struck her a violent blow in the face. She reeled backward and fell. Before she could rise, the coward drew a deringer and fired. With a moan, the poor creature sunk in a lifeless heap to the earth.

White Pine glanced around him with the look of a murderer on his face. Then he dragged the body into some bushes, advanced to the river, and cutting the painter of the squaw's boat, sent the craft adrift.

With hasty footsteps the man then went on his way, though it was evident from the furtive glances he cast around him that his deed had unnerved him.

He hurried on through the dense pine woods for nearly two miles, when he came in sight of a low log-cabin standing at the foot of the mountain. When within a hundred yards of the building he stopped, passed his hand over his brow and uttered a low curse.

For a moment he stood as if in doubt, then turned to the right, and passing around the cabin, moved on up the valley running back into the hills. A mile further on, he came to a little mining-camp known at that time—but now entirely abandoned and forgotten—as Whisky-Famine. It was composed of a score of log-cabins grouped together at the foot of a towering bluff.

Whisky-Famine had sprung into existence at the time the great mining excitement had swept through the mountains of Southern Colorado and revealed the wealth of the Leadville and Gunnison districts. A dozen adventuresome spirits had struck the valley and "signs" of untold treasure, and at once proceeded to locate a camp. For a while they were at a loss for a name, when a facetious old bumme suggested that, in view of the fact that not a "drop" of liquor was to be had at the christening, they call it Whisky-Famine, and Whisky-Famine was the name unanimously agreed upon; although it was but a short time until there was an abundance of "miner's comfort" in every cabin in the camp. There was one place, in particular, called The Miner's Mecca, and it was straight toward the open door of this saloon that White Pine advanced.

Entering the cabin, he made his way to the bar without noticing the lazy bummers who reclined on benches waiting the call of some one to step up and "irrigate," and said:

"Scholte, give me some whisky."

"Why, major," exclaimed the proprietor of the Mecca, "vat ish de matter mit you? You seem up all broke."

"I'm in a deuce of a hurry, Scholte, to get off," replied White Pine, as he drank to the dregs a glass of raw whisky; "I'm going into the mountains with a prospecting party. Give me another glass of the same."

After restoring his nerves with repeated glasses of liquor, White Pine left the Mecca and began retracing his steps down the valley. He soon came back in sight of the cabin at the foot of the hill, and made his way toward it.

At the door he was met by an elderly man, whose general appearance told that he was a Spaniard—a man of intelligence and noble bearing, yet upon whose face there was a troubled, careworn look.

"Good-afternoon, friend Alvandez," White Pine saluted.

"Ah! it is Senor Postle!" said the old man, with a sudden start.

"Yes, I just came down from Mecca to see you and your daughter before I went away into the mountains."

"I will call Zonita," and the old man, rising, left the room in which White Pine had been seated.

In a few moments Zonita, a girl of eighteen, came sweeping into the apartment with the dignity of a young queen. She was a lovely girl in form and features, with a light shining from her dark, liquid eyes that told of the pride of noble birth, humble and secluded as was her home.

At sight of the man whom she addressed as Senor Postle, a faint smile of scorn curled her lips, as she said:

"Pardon me, senor, but I was not expecting you to-day."

"Zonita, I did not expect to be here, either, but I am going away to-day and may be gone a week, and I have called to insist on an answer to my question of yesterday."

"Senor," answered the girl, sadly, "I respect you, but do not love you. I cannot be your wife."

"Respect brings love, Zonita."

"Not always. It is better that I wait and be sure of love before marriage."

"But I do not desire to wait longer," declared the villain-lover, "nor will your father sanction further delay."

"Senor, why is my father so anxious I should marry you?"

"Has he never told you, Zonita?"

"Not a word."

"You know why you are living here in seclusion, do you not?"

Zonita started and uttered a little cry.

"What do you know, senor?" she half-gasped.

"I know all. I am the very man who wrenched the knife out of your father's hand when he slew Colonel Arizpa at San Vicente. I know his name is not Alvandez."

"And why did you not expose him there?" asked the maiden.

"Because I loved you, Zonita," was the reply.

"You cannot live happily with the daughter of a murderer."

"I will take my chances. What is your answer?"

"I must talk with father. Come back to-morrow."

The man's brow darkened. He rose and paced the floor for a few moments in silence, then turned upon her.

"Zonita, you have trifled with me long enough. To-morrow I will return—I will put off my trip—and when I come I will bring a priest and an officer. If you have not made up your mind to marry me, I shall give your father into the hands of the officer."

"Oh, Senor Postle!" began the half-distracted girl, but before she could say more the villain dashed out of the room and hurried away in the direction of Whisky-Famine.

A few moments later Zonita's father came in and found the maiden in tears.

"Oh, my father!" she cried, wringing her hands in grief, "he is the man who wrenched the knife from you when you slew Colonel Arizpa!"

"I never slew my friend and brother, Colonel Arizpa!" declared the father, vehemently. "A conspiracy sent me an exile here, Zonita; and now I begin to think it is a conspiracy to rob you of your inheritance and happiness. But, we are entirely helpless here—at the mercy of this Senor Postle."

"Father, we can flee from here as we fled here."

"My child, I haven't the strength," sadly the father answered.

"Senor Postle says he will come to-morrow with a priest and an officer."

"Senor Postle is a villain! I now believe he is the assassin who slew my friend, and fixed the crime on me. Oh! that I had the strength that I once had! I would make him bow in acknowledgment of the truth at my feet. But, alas! we are at his mercy."

"Father, let us burn our cabin and flee from here. We can take our way into the hills, and elude our enemies. I have my rifle and we will not starve."

"But where will we go?"

Before Zonita could answer she was startled by an apparition that appeared in the doorway. It was a young Indian woman, whose garments were covered with blood, and whose wild, terrified face was bruised and swollen. She was breathing hard, and as she staggered into the room, she cast one wild, imploring look at the old man and his daughter, then fell to the floor in a swoon.

"Oh, heavens! what does this mean?" cried Zonita.

"Poor thing! Perhaps she is a fugitive," the old man suggested.

"She is bloody! she is wounded!" exclaimed the maiden, bending over the prostrate form.

"The work of some white devil, I'll be bound!" the old man declared.

Lifting the woman, they placed her upon a cot in one corner of the room. Zonita then brought water and washed the blood from her face and hands, and administered such restoratives as were at hand. In a short time the squaw recovered, and when she discovered that she had fallen into kind hands, a smile of relief drove the hard lines of fear from her face, although it could be seen that she was still in great agony. The cause of this was soon discovered in a wound in the shoulder, that looked as though it had been made by a bullet.

"You have been hurt, haven't you?" the old man questioned, when he saw her open her eyes.

"Yes, yes, but where is my baby?—my baby?" the squaw cried, starting up and looking around her in bewilderment, and then, with a wild, despairing moan, sinking back in a deathlike swoon.

CHAPTER X.

A LITTLE WAIF IN CAMP.

ON the banks of the Arkansas river a few miles below Whisky-Famine, Little Buckskin and three of the amateur hunters were encamped, awaiting the return, or rather the coming of Kit Bandy and Bob Malvern. Being unable to find Kit, who had started off to follow Bob and his captors, they had gone over to the river, as Kit had instructed them to, there to await his reappearance.

With his usual precaution, Buckskin had selected a camp flanked on two sides by perpendicular cliffs and the other two sides by dense undergrowth. Here they lighted a fire and prepared supper, after which they sat down to discuss the situation.

When night set in Deck Rollins took the first watch by the river—not that they feared danger so much as that Kit might pass them by unobserved from where their camp was located.

About ten o'clock Rollins was relieved by young Lawrence, and a few minutes after the latter had gone on duty his ears were greeted by a faint sound that seemed to come from up the river. It was unlike any sound he had ever heard in the open night, and could not imagine what produced it. It was only heard at intervals, and each time it was repeated it seemed to be coming nearer and nearer. It sounded like the cry of a child—a baby, but that the youth thought was impossible; yet he was afraid to report to his friends through fear of never hearing the last of it. So he stood at his post until the sound came so close that it reached the ears of those at camp and brought them down to the river.

"What's the matter down here, boy?" demanded Buckskin.

"You tell," replied Lawrence; "there's some kind of a racket going on out yonder on the river that I can't understand."

The moon was up, and as its light fell upon the bosom of the river they were enabled to see what appeared to be a canoe floating at the will of the current near the middle of the stream some few rods above them.

"There goes an empty canoe," said Buckskin, "or one that seems to be empty, and yet the noise appears to come from that direction. Boys, don't that sound to you like a cry?"

"Yes, like a baby's cry," responded Rollins.

The boys all laughed.

"The idea of a baby being out here in the mountains floating around in a canoe seems awful absurd," said Little Buckskin; "but I'll be paralyzed if I don't believe it's the case."

"Where on earth could it have come from?"

"I reckon somebody up the river has had more of them than they could take care of, and sent a kid afloat," was Buckskin's opinion. "Just listen to its cries!"

"Maybe it's a decoy to get us into trouble?" suggested Rollins.

"It can't be, Deck; that cry is too genuine. It makes me feel a homesickness in the breast that tells there's a baby in that canoe, and if there is any one with it he or she is dead or asleep, and I'm going to see about it."

As he concluded, Little Buckskin began divesting himself of his clothing, and finally, when the boat was nearly opposite him, he plunged into the river and struck out, swimming with the ease and rapidity of a beaver, carrying

his hunting-knife between his teeth in case of necessity.

His friends watched him in eagerness and silence, their eyes beaming with a light of admiration for the fearless young hunter.

Half the distance to the middle of the stream was made when to the horror of the young amateurs, they beheld the head of a man in the water who was swimming toward the boat from the opposite shore.

"Great heavens! that is a trap set for our friend!" exclaimed Deck Rollins. "Ho, Buckskin! there's some one approaching from the opposite shore."

Whether the boy heard the warning or not, he swam on, and finally reached the canoe.

Standing erect in the water by treading, he caught hold of the gunwale of the boat and peered over into it. As he did so, a head rose from the water on the opposite side of the craft, and a face lit up with a malignant smile was revealed to the youth's gaze.

At a glance Buckskin recognized it as that of an inveterate foe—an outlawed cowboy, a follower of Utah Bill named Paschal.

An oath burst from the villain's lips when he discovered the presence of the boy hunter, and he made a grab at his throat; but, quick as a flash, Buckskin dropped down behind the canoe, thereby eluding the outlaw's grasp.

With bated breath the three amateurs stood motionless gazing with fixed eyes upon the boat. They saw, even from where they were, both Buckskin and the outlaw rise at the side of the boat. They heard the latter's oath, and then saw Buckskin disappear.

The next moment they saw evidence of a terrific struggle going on at the side of the frail craft, which was violently rocking upon the agitated water. They could catch glimpses of the struggling foes as they rose to the surface. They saw the flash of the knife in the hand of one of the combatants; then the canoe drifted away from the scene of the conflict. Was Little Buckskin slain?

The struggle was ended, when the three spectators beheld the survivor strike out after the boat. But, which one? That one of the twain had been killed there was not a doubt, and the fear that it was their friend, Little Buckskin, who had perished filled the breasts of the amateurs with a horrible suspense.

A few strokes carried the swimmer to the canoe, in which still lay the crying babe.

"Now we will soon know who was killed," announced Rollins, in a husky voice, as he hovered over the very edge of the water, in his eagerness to learn the truth.

They saw the canoe stopped; again they saw the head of a swimmer rise above the gunwale, then disappear again. They next moment the prow of the bark turned slowly in the current and began to move toward the southern shore!

A shout that rung in merry echoes through the hills burst from the lips of the amateurs. Their friend lived and was coming ashore with the canoe!

Slowly the craft pushed across the current and finally reached the shore, a few rods below where the young hunter had left his three friends.

The boys were there to welcome their leader. "You got the baby, didn't you, Buckskin?" cried Rollins, joyfully.

"Yes, boys, but I had to fight for it," replied the youth.

"Who with? Ingin or outlaw?"

"Outlaw of the first water."

"He may be the father of this child, Buckskin?"

"Father of nothin'; but it's a good thing I took my knife, for Jule Paschal is a big, stout brute that'd soon fixed me if I hadn't made him feel homesick in the stomach with my knife. But, boys, take up that kid and bring it to camp."

Deck Rollins stooped and lifted the crying infant in his arms and started to the camp.

Little Buckskin donned his clothes and reached camp as soon as his friends.

A few pine sticks were thrown upon the fire, and a bright light lit up the eager, anxious faces of the four youths.

The infant was closely wrapped in shawls, and laying it tenderly upon the ground Rollins proceeded to unwrap it so that they could see its face.

"An Ingin baby, by smoke!" burst from Buckskin's lips as his eyes fell upon the child's face.

It was a tiny lump of humanity, not over four or five months old—a boy baby, which, when unrolled from the wraps around it, was entirely innocent of a stitch of clothes.

In silent wonder the group stood and gazed

upon the child. For once in his life Buckskin Phil was at his wits' ends.

"Boys, what in thunder are we going to do with the kid, now that we have drawn it?"

"Well, what indeed?" repeated Deck Rollins.

The boys exchanged glances. There was a confused, puzzled look upon each one's face.

"It's a pretty little critter," confessed Buckskin, "and must be cared for till claimed by its owners."

After being set at liberty from the confinement of its wraps, the baby hushed its cries, and crowded its chubby fist into its mouth, kicked up its fat feet and gazed up at the dancing firelight on the rocks overhanging the camp.

"The little scamp's hungry as a wolf," decided Buckskin; "just see it chew its fist. Boys, what in the nation are we going to do with it?"

"Isn't there any women up at Whisky-Famine?" asked Rollins.

"Not a woman that I know of, unless she came there within the past two months. I have an idea this cub's mother can be found, and as soon as day comes I'll take a hunt for a mother for our waif. Hello! hear the little chunk tuning up again!"

The baby began to cry, and stooping over it, Little Buckskin wrapped a light shawl around it, and lifted it in his arms and endeavored to quiet it.

Sharp and shrill, its cries rung out through the night—a strange sound indeed to be heard in the bivouac of the boy brigade—a strange sight, indeed, to see the young borderman pacing to and fro with a babe in his arms—talking, singing and whistling to it in his endeavors to quiet it.

The child finally went to sleep, when Buckskin tucked it away in its shawls and robe and laid it at the foot of the great rock.

"Boys," said the young borderman, "there are Ingins around here somewhere, sure as death."

That baby hasn't come alone very far, and it behooves us to look out or we may git our hair banged. I guess I'll go out here and stand guard a while and look out for Bandy. You fellers 'd better let this fire go out, but take good care of little smoke-skin over there. Keep your fingers on your weapons, your eyes open and your ears pinned back."

With these words of precaution the Centaur walked away, leaving the amateurs seated around the waning camp-fire.

Scarcely half an hour had passed when the three heard voices down near the river.

"By goodness!" exclaimed Rollins, "there's the voice of Kit Bandy!"

"I wonder if Bob is safe?"

They sprung to their feet and started toward the river, but ere they had gone far they were met by Little Buckskin, Old Kit, and Bob Malvern, and then for awhile joy reigned supreme in that mountain bivouac.

Old Kit seated himself by the fire, feeling somewhat jaded after his long tramp, while Bob Malvern threw himself upon the ground declaring that he had about enough recreation and excitement to do him during the rest of his natural life.

Old Kit was called upon for his story of the adventures of the day, and without a prelude he started out in his usual happy vein. But, all of a sudden, there arose a shriek behind him, and with a yoop the old detective sprung to his feet.

"Hill-flugins!" he exclaimed, "war that a Cowmanche war-whoop?—the scream o' a hyena?"

The boy hunter and his three companions burst into a peal of laughter, for they had kept the presence of the baby in camp a secret from Kit and Bob.

"Kitsie," explained Little Buckskin, "there's a baby in that bundle."

"A baby?" and Old Kit betrayed his utter astonishment.

"Yes, a genuine baby; we found it afloat in a boat on the river."

"Well, by the blast o' Joshua's horn!" the veteran detective exclaimed, advancing toward the bundle from whence shriek after shriek was issuing, "what in the name o' screech-owls is to come next? Yes, sir, by the sainted mother o' old Adam! it's a baby—a real meat baby—Ingin at that; but, by snakes, he's a royal little dumplin' for all that. Come up here, you little rascal," and the old man took up the child and walked back to the fire with it and seated himself. "Lordy, boys," he went on, his voice choked, "it's been many a day since I've heard a baby cry, and many a year since I've felt one squirm in these old hands. By jinks! the sight o' the little rip mellowed me all up, boys. See

them little chuffy arms and legs, and them fat fists and feet! A'rn't he a royal little rooster? It don't seem possible that I, Ka-ristopher Kolumbus Bandy, wor ever a kitten like this—that my old mother who's been dead these many years, ever dandled me around like this. Boys, it makes my old heart homesick. Here we set, the two extremes o' manhood—the baby's jist startin' up the hill and I'm cumin' down—he's comin' on—I'm goin' off—day is dawnin' to him—twilight shades are gatherin' before me. Ah, you little coyote! you're hungry as a bear, and no teeth for solid food. You are 'n a bad fix, little one. If you could only onbutton your lip and tell us whence you came, we might restore you to your folks. And so the rat came driftin' down the river in a canoe alone?"

"Yes," Buckskin answered.

"Somethin' 's goin' wrong somewhar," Kit went on; "it's a hard heart that 'd desert as nice little coon as this. It's not its mother's fault that it's here, you can gamble your last cent on that. See the little thing look up at me! Heavens! I've a mind to bite it! A baby alers *did* break me up—yoop! here it goes again on a yell. Got regular Ingin lungs, even if it is half white. Joshua! don't it buckle down to the work! There, there—whew! whew!" and the grim detective began singing and whistling to quiet the baby, and the boys began to laugh vociferously.

The baby cried itself to sleep, then Kit carefully wrapped it up, and settling himself in an easy position, held the little waif in his arms with the tenderness and solicitude of one whose very soul seemed enchanted.

Deck Rollins finally went back to the river and took his position as watch. He had not been there long ere he was startled by the appearance of a cloaked figure from the shadows of some shrubbery on his left. It was the figure of a woman, who approached him with slow footsteps—as if in doubt as to whether he was a friend or foe; and to relieve her of all fears he advanced toward her, saying:

"Madam, have no fears of me; I am a friend!"

"Oh, thanks, senor," she replied, in a sweet, musical voice that touched a tender chord in the young man's breast.

As the woman approached nearer she dropped the cloak, worn hood-like over the head, to her shoulders, and the moonbeams falling full upon her, revealed a face exquisite in its loveliness.

It was a young face—the face of the maiden, Zonita Alvarez.

"Madam," Rollins said, "I hope you are not lost?"

"No, senor, I came here in search of—"

"A child?—a baby?"

"Ah! then you have found it?" exclaimed the maiden, joyfully.

"Yes, it is at camp. We found it in a canoe adrift on the river. Come, I will conduct you to our camp."

"Thank you, senor; you are very kind," and the girl followed the youth to camp.

"Friends," announced Rollins, as they entered the radius of light, "here is a lady in search of our little waif."

"Indeed?" exclaimed Old Kit, rising to his feet with the babe in his arms. "Well, my fair woman, here's your baby safe and sound, though hungrier 'n a little bear."

The girl blushed to the tips of the ears.

"Senor, it is not my child."

"Oh, pardon me, miss," Bandy returned, somewhat confused, "I might 'a' known it. But do you know whose it is?"

"It belongs to an Indian woman who lies very low at my father's cabin," responded Zonita.

"Where does your father reside?"

"Up toward the miner's camp of Whisky-Famine."

"And your name?"

"Zonita Alvarez."

"You are a Spanish lady?"

"Yes, sir."

"Wal, I'll swear I didn't know thar war a woman within forty 'leven miles o' here. Be your father a miner?"

"Not exactly, senor," the girl replied, somewhat evasively.

"Excuse me, little one," said Old Kit, apologetically; "I'm a terrible old fool to ax questions when I git sot a-goin'. But, I'll turn this little kid over to you now, for I reckon you can handle it a little nimbler 'n I can. We're a lot o' boys, miss, frolicking 'round up here for sport, and now we're not goin' to let you go back alone through this night. Here, Buckskin, you and Deck Rollins I appoint as a committee to see this gal and baby safe to the gal's home, and if

ye don't want to go, I, Kit Bandy, myself will go."

But Little Buckskin and Rollins were only too glad to escort the lovely girl, and announced their willingness to go at once.

So Buckskin Phil took the baby, and as they turned to leave, young Rollins offered Zonita his arm, which was accepted with a smile.

"By gracious!" exclaimed Bob Malvern, as the trio with the baby disappeared in the gloom, "Deck Rollins has met his fate! He's all broke up on that girl."

"Do you blame the boy for fallin' in love with an angel?" asked Kit Bandy. "Darn my old scalp! she's the prettiest gal I ever see'd. I do believe I'm all broke up on her, myself, and as to that baby, blessed if I don't feel lonesome. If I jist was sure that Sabina Bandy would never drap down on me, I'd show you lads that, old and desolate as I am, I could make love to a little angel with all the grace o' a young cavalier. Let's see: she said her name was Zonita Alvandez. She is a Spanish girl, and do you know that she's no plebeian? Do you know that rich old Castilian blood courses her veins? By the ram's horn o' Joshua! what if her father is—"

Here the old detective broke suddenly off, and turning, he began pacing to and fro before the fire, his eyes cast downward and his brows knitted as if in deep reflection.

And the amateur hunters, looking on in silence, wondered what next the eventful night would bring forth.

CHAPTER XI.

ZONITA'S REQUEST.

ZONITA and Deck Rollins led the way through the wooded valley, followed by Little Buckskin with the baby.

The girl seemed to put implicit confidence in her escort, for she talked freely to them; and Deck Rollins listened to every word with close attention and the utmost credulity. But, while Little Buckskin was willing to admit her beauty and the music of her voice, her surroundings were such as led him to fear that all might not be what it appeared.

"I am truly surprised to find a young lady in this desolate mountain valley," Rollins admitted, as they moved along.

"I presume so, senor," replied the girl; "but it is not by my wish that we are here. I am living a dreary, dreadful life here."

"Your father, you say, is not a miner?"

"No, sir," she again replied, in an evasive manner.

"Then I cannot imagine what business he could be engaged in here," observed Rollins, determined to compel a direct answer, if possible.

"He is not an outlaw or robber, senor," the girl replied; "although I fear he will be mistrusted by you and your friends of being such; but let me assure you, upon the honor of a lady, that my father is an honorable gentleman."

"I believe—ay, I know you speak the truth, Miss Alvandez, and it would afford me and my friends the greatest pleasure to render you and your father any assistance or favor you might ask."

"You are kind—very kind, senor. I must confess we are in need of friends at this time, for a danger hangs over us that we sought the solitude of these mountains to escape; but I should not thrust my grievances upon strangers."

"Don't hesitate, Miss Alvandez, to speak freely, for I again assure you that it will be a pleasure for us to be of service to you. I know something is going wrong—we all thought so when we found that child."

"Yes, the mother of that infant lies in our cabin dangerously wounded by the bullet of her husband and would-be assassin. It was he who sent the boat adrift with their child, and when she had dragged her bleeding form to our cabin, and told me where she had left her child, I came in search of it for her. She is an Indian woman—her husband is a white man."

"He must be a dreadful villain," declared Rollins.

"He is a bad man, senor, and it is him we fear."

"Where is he now?"

"At Whisky-Famine, I suppose."

"And his name?"

"To father and I he is known as Captain Byron Postle; in the Indian village where he married his squaw wife, he is called White Pine."

"Are you threatened with immediate danger from him?"

"We are, senor; before to-morrow night. Oh, I wish I dare reveal all to you!"

"And why not?"

"Because our tongues are tied, senor."

"There is some mystery about your and your father's life, I see, Miss Alvandez."

The girl made no reply to this. They walked on in silence. Finally the twinkle of a light some distance ahead fell upon their gaze. Rollins called attention to it.

"It shines from our cabin, senor," explained the maiden.

"Perhaps you would rather that we go no further, Miss Alvandez?"

"You are very thoughtful, senor; I do not know how my father would accept your presence. He is a strange man."

"Then we'd better go no nearer," decided Buckskin Phil.

"May I make a request of you, senor?" the girl asked, her hand still resting upon young Rollins's arm.

"Certainly, Miss Alvandez."

"Will you and your friends not come and camp near our cabin for a day or two?"

"Nothing would afford me greater pleasure, Miss Alvandez," replied Rollins.

"I fear something dreadful is going to happen unless we have the help of friends. If you come to-morrow it may be that father will give me permission to tell you all. You see, I trust you gentlemen, with all my heart."

"We hope that we will prove worthy of that trust," returned Rollins, gallantly.

"Miss," said the more outspoken Little Buckskin, "I think you are a pretty nice girl, and we'll be around this way to-morrow, and if anybody offers harm or insult to a hair of your head we'll make them bow down in the dust. Kit Bandy's all broke up on this little Ingen, and I know he'll be glad to come."

Having thus spoken, Buckskin placed the child in Zonita's arms, and bidding her good-night, the two turned and began retracing their footsteps toward camp, where they arrived in due course of time.

They found their friends anxiously awaiting their return, and to them they at once made known all they had learned of the maiden concerning herself and the child.

"That's somethin' wrong thar, boys," averred Old Kit. "That gal's no sinner, and jist as soon as it's daylight we'll amble up thar and shadow that cabin. We might strike somethin' as would give us a clew to Colonel Darre's whereabouts. Now, let's turn in, all o' us, and take a snooze, and be ready when the time comes to march."

So saying, all but the one left on guard rolled themselves in their blankets and laid down to sleep.

At intervals of every two hours the guard was relieved.

Daylight came, and with the first streaks of dawn the party broke camp and started up the river.

They had proceeded but a short distance when they were startled by a sound in a clump of bushes on their right, and upon investigation they saw a horse, bridled and saddled, standing hitched to a tree, while upon the ground lay a man wrapped in a blanket either asleep or dead.

"By the great thunders!" exclaimed Little Buckskin, in a whisper, "that is my horse, boys!"

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Old Kit, aloud. "I wonder what has happened them two gals, Augusta and Jeannette?"

The sleeper awoke at the sound of Old Kit's voice, and sprung to his feet. He was a young man dressed in a ranchero's suit.

Little Buckskin recognized him at a glance as Tom Krome, one of the two cowboys who had come up from Zane's ranch in search of Augusta and Jeannette.

"Hello, Tom!" the young hunter exclaimed, "what in the Lord's name is wrong now? Are the girls safe?"

"Yes, Buckskin," answered Krome; "we got back safe to the ranch with them."

"Any word yet from Colonel Darre?" asked Bob Malvern.

"Yes. He is evidently in the power o' Utah Bill."

"What evidence have you of this fact?"

"This letter," and Krome took a folded note from his pocket. "When we got back to the ranch it was waiting Miss Augusta's rival. It was sealed and directed to her. It had been handed to Joe Falls, one o' our boys, the day the colonel disappeared, by a man who came up the river, and who went back in that direction, though I think he went that way for a blind. Here's the letter; you can read it."

He handed the paper to Bob Malvern, who, unfolding it, read aloud the following:

"MISS AUGUSTA DARRE:—

"Your father is in my care, where he will remain until I hear from you in person or through your

agent. I am informed by one who knows that your father is rich, and that you have thousands in your own name. I am poor and in need, and I know you will pay me well for the restoration of your father to you. I must have *five thousand dollars*. I will give you ample time to effect his ransom, knowing your home and money are in Kentucky. But that I may know what you intend to do, I must have an interview with your agent forthwith. I will appoint as place of meeting, the Miner's Mecca, at Whisky-Famine, for day after to-morrow, at any time between sunrise and sunset. I, or my agent, will be there. Instruct your agent to wear a blue ribbon or string attached to his hat-band, that he may be recognized by me or my agent, who will be disguised. He must come alone, or he will not be recognized. Any attempt to thwart me, or to find Colonel Darre, I warn you, will be futile. I have not undertaken this without making my position secure. I defy all the detectives and soldiers in the land. Remember that any attempt to wrest my secret from my agent by bribery or torture will be followed by the death of Colonel Darre. The name I here subscribe is sufficient guarantee that what is said herein will be fulfilled. UTAH BILL."

"Hill-flugins!" burst from Bandy's lips; "that's the game Utah William is up to!"

"Taking his cue from Italian bandits," suggested Bob Malvern.

"He's a sly, slick coon, boys," observed the old detective.

"And will probably get his price before Darre does his liberty."

"Wal, negotiations'll have to be opened with the villain," replied Bandy, "and mebbey we can entrap him; but by the horn o' Joshua! we'll have to keep ourselves under cover."

"I am fully satisfied now that Paul Dumont has had something to do with Darre's capture," remarked Malvern, "though I cannot see what object he has in it."

"I'm satisfied he's a friend o' Utah's," was Kit's view.

"Suppose I go up to Whisky-Famine to represent Miss Darre," suggested Little Buckskin, ever anxious for excitement.

"It was Miss Darre's wish that you should act for her, in case I found you," Tom Krome announced.

"Then that settles it," said Old Kit; "but I reckon if I'd been a young and skittish youth I'd got the job. Age goes against a feller with the gals, but when it comes to solid work— But say, boy, you've got to be religiously keeful when you go up thar to that devil's nest. You want to keep your lip buttoned, and not git too numerous in tryin' to find out things. You want to make 'me, or my agent' think you don't know any more'n the Constitution allows, and that you're an innocent, unsuspectin' child who knoweth nothin' but how to set a beaver-trap or find your pocket in the dark."

"All right, Kitsie, I'll do the best I can. I'd better take the letter along too," thought Buckskin, "as additional credentials."

"Here's a piece of blue ribbon furnished me by Augusta," and Krome produced a tiny bit of silk.

Buckskin at once prepared to depart for Whisky-Famine, and having arranged as to where he should meet his friends after the interview at the Miner's Mecca, he mounted his noble horse and rode away toward the camp of the gold-hunters.

CHAPTER XII.

LITTLE BUCKSKIN AT THE MECCA.

THE sun was perhaps two hours high when our hero rode into Whisky-Famine and drew rein in front of the Miner's Mecca.

Dismounting, the boy hitched his horse and entered the saloon. He found half a dozen rough, bearded miners present, all seated on a bench smoking and talking. That Whisky-Famine was on the rapid decline as a mining-camp was evidenced by the dull, lifeless demeanor of these six men. No shuffling of cards, rattling of dice, clinking of glasses or boisterous talk proclaimed that life and energy, and "business" so characteristic of the leading saloons of a rich-paying camp.

The presence of Little Buckskin, however, seemed to infuse a little additional life into the miners, for to them he was a stranger. They started up, and one of them, the proprietor of the Mecca, said:

"Mornin', young man!"

"Good-morning, sir," replied Buckskin.

"Rather young to be out in the mornin' frost, ben't you?" asked one of the miners.

"I'm young, it's true," replied Buckskin, "but I'm not as sappy as bunch-grass in June."

"What can I do for you?" asked Scholte, the proprietor; "what'll you have?"

"I don't drink, sir," replied Buckskin.

"Whew!" ejaculated the proprietor; "no chap can worship at this shrine unless he con-

tributes to its support. Come up, boys; what will you have at our young friend's expense?"

"Say, old man," said Buckskin, "you don't want to cork yourself now. If these folks 'worship,' as you call it, they'll have to foot the bill, for I'm dead broke."

"Gosh! he slings langwidge like an old boomer."

"I see you've got a revolver," said Scholte; "you can pawn—"

"Yes, I've got a revolver, and I know how to use it, too," broke in the boy; "all I ask of you is to be let alone. Your darned old camp seems like a graveyard now, and I should think you'd try to encourage emigration instead of jumpin' onto a lone, lost boy."

"Pretty well said," remarked one of the crowd, a tall, heavily-bearded fellow, who advanced, and putting out his hand, said: "Shake, boy, and then come in here; I want to sell you some mining-stock."

Then the man turned and led the way to an adjoining room, the boy following him, satisfied that he was Utah Bill or his agent.

When alone in the room, a little dingy hole of a place, the miner turned to the youth and said:

"I see you wear the blue ribbon, young man."

"Then you are—"

"The man you are here to meet," interrupted the miner; "you can call me 'Basil.' Who sent you here?"

"Miss Darre."

"What other proof have you of this?"

"This letter you sent her," replied the boy, producing the note.

"That is sufficient; but, young man, I hope you fully understand that the least attempt on your part to betray Utah Bill will be your death-warrant."

"I understand that fully, if I am a kid," replied Buckskin; "but my only doubt is as to whether you'll do what you agree to do."

"Utah Bill has never broken a promise to friend or foe."

"Well, go on with your rat-killing."

"Bill's terms are stated in the letter—five thousand dollars placed in his hands secures the release of Colonel Darre. I will give two months from to-day for the delivery to be made. After that time it will take ten thousand, if he's alive, to release him. Bill wants the money delivered right here in this room. On and after a week from to-morrow an agent of Bill's will be around this saloon, and whoever brings the money must wear a red ribbon, a small bit is sufficient, tied to his hat-band by which he may be recognized. If you come, boy, you'll not find me here, but a different man will meet you. If more than one of you comes you will not be recognized at all. Don't forget that. Even if there are any strangers in camp, or close around, nothing will be done till they retire. As soon as the money is counted out to Bill's agent Colonel Darre will be released, though he will be miles from here. This, now, is all I have to say, and you are at liberty to go."

"All right, I think I understand the arrangements," said Little Buckskin.

"Here, you can go out here," said the outlaw's agent, opening a little door at the side of the room.

Buckskin stepped through the opening and found himself outside the Miner's Mecca. Passing around the building to his horse he mounted and rode away. He had gone but a short distance when he heard the sound of a pistol-shot come from the Mecca behind him, and drawing rein, he listened. To his surprise he heard loud yells and curses and cries of "Hang him! hang him!"

Quickly it occurred to the boy's mind that the miners had discovered that the man he had held the conference with was an outlaw—perhaps Utah Bill himself. This discovery could easily have been made had the miners taken the pains to have listened at the door of the conference room; and through fear it had been made, and, that the man would be killed, and the ransom of Colonel Darre fail in consequence of the "agent's" death, Buckskin whirled his horse and galloped back toward the saloon.

The door of the building stood open, and throwing himself forward upon the horse's neck, the daring boy rode boldly into the Mecca.

"What in the dickens is wrong here?" the lad exclaimed, as he drew his revolver and ran his eyes over the scene before him.

Standing with his back against the opposite end of the room, a revolver in one hand and a long-necked bottle grasped as a club in the other, was Old Kit Bandy holding at bay half a dozen infuriated miners.

Buckskin Phil was almost astonished to find

the old detective there, when he supposed he had left him behind with his other friends.

Before the Young Centaur had time to express a word that denoted his recognition of the detective, the latter yelled out:

"That's it, you monumental vampire! Run in your baby-faced cavalry—bring on yer artillery, and I, Old Jack Salts, will maul hill and blixes outen the hull o' you! Draw that weepen, you young prairie pup, and I'll give you a hyperdermic injection o' lead!"

The last words were addressed to Little Buckskin, and the boy saw that the old detective did not want to be recognized, and seeing the man Basil standing at one side regarding first himself and then Kit, as if in doubt as to whether they were friends or not, he resolved to help carry out the old man's work of deception, and said:

"You're a pretty specimen of humanity, you bandy-shanked, lop-eared old bummer! Boys, give me room, and I'll ride the old shoat down. If I am a boy, I'm not in the habit o' bein' sassed by such an old carcass; give me room!"

Expecting to witness a conflict between the boy and bummer such as they never had looked upon, the miners fell back, and then Buckskin spurred his horse forward.

Old Kit let fly the bottle in his hand, but it missed Buckskin and struck the proprietor of the Mecca in the face, knocking him down senseless. Then he seized the horse by the bits and jerked it back, and the next moment the horse and rider and Old Jack Salts went spinning around the room in wild confusion. To add to the confusion of the sham conflict, both Buckskin and Old Kit opened with their revolvers, and in two seconds the saloon had been deserted by the spectators, who seemed to be in more peril than the contestants.

And scarcely was the last one out of the building when Little Buckskin slipped from his saddle, saying:

"Mount, man, and fly!"

Old Kit turned and leaped upon the back of the horse, threw himself forward upon its neck just as the animal shot out through the open door, and dashed away down the valley.

Buckskin, apparently panting for breath, ran to the door and fired his last shot at the flying horseman, and then the excited miners recovered sufficiently from their scare to send a dozen shots after the man.

"Wal, boy," said one of the miners, "you've lost yer hoss, and it's darned lucky ye didn't lose your life. You're too small a pattern to undertake to buck sich an old blacksnake as that feller."

"If you chaps hadn't run, you might have helped me a little," said the boy, reproachfully.

"You invited us to stand aside, and we stood—s'posed you knowed your gait. But where's Scholte?"

A groan from within answered him, and the miners all rushed into the saloon to look after their friend who lay bleeding upon the floor.

While they were thus engaged, Buckskin Phil turned and hurried out of the camp; and when the proprietor of the Mecca had regained his feet and sought for the author of his battered face, and the boy who had dared to ride on horseback into his "temple," he found them not, and his curses grew loud and bitter.

Little Buckskin hurried back to his friends, and was met by Old Kit with a smile, who said:

"How did ye leave the folks at the Mecca?"

"I left them on foot, you old sinner! What on earth were you doing up there in that p'izen place?" replied the boy.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the old detective; "it did turn out a rather serious joke; but a moment after you left us to-day I caught sight of a horseman movin' up the valley, and concluded to foller him. He went straight up toward Whisky-Famine, but I lost sight of him just before he reached there. However, I went on, and fu'st thing I knowed, I found myself cornered in the Mecca, and, dash my picters! if I didn't hear one o' them lazy louts say he believed I war Kit Bandy, the detective. Boy, if you hadn't come in there when you did it'd gone pretty rough with me. But say, did that feller what I chugged in the face with a bottle up to the Mecca come to time?—show up? Did he yearn for the presence o' Old Jack Salts?"

"I heard him howling when I took my departure; but say, has anybody been to yonder cabin?"

"No; but Deck Rollins has seen and talked with that girl that came for the baby, and invited us all to the weddin'," said Bob Malvern.

"Her wedding?"

"Yes, her wedding; she's to be married to-day!"

"Great horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Old Kit, for this was the first he had heard of it, having been back from the miners' camp but a few minutes before Buckskin; "who on earth 'll the gal marry? Lord! it'll murder Rollins, won't it? A weddin' in the wilderness! People will marry wharever ye go. And we're invited?"

"Yes, and there will be some rich developments, too," said Malvern.

"You bet you thar'll be one," said Kit, "for I'll kiss that bride or kick the roof off the cabin. I'm a salubrious old kisser at a weddin', and don't you disremember it."

"But you don't understand me, Kit; there is likely to be trouble."

"Trouble? What, so soon as that? Why, mine and Sabina's trouble didn't begin for several days after we war matrimonied. Guess if that's the case we'd better move to reconsider the proposed bridegroom and substitute Deck Rollins."

"But perhaps the proposed bridegroom 'ud have something to say 'bout such a proceeding," said Tom Krome, the cowboy.

"Wal, if we're in the minority we can filibuster and pervert the—"

"Hark, Kit!" said Malvern, "yonder comes Zonita's father, Senor Alvandez."

Turning, the old detective saw the Spanish recluse approaching them, walking slowly and with feeble step. For a moment Kit stood motionless, his eyes fixed upon the stranger, then starting suddenly he turned to his friends and said, in a low, excited voice:

"By the livin' waters! that man is the murderer of Colonel Arizpa! It is Don Estaban, and I have a warrant for his arrest. The reward is a thousand dollars for him, dead or alive!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WEDDING INTERRUPTED.

DON ESTABAN, or Alvandez, as we will continue to call the old Spanish recluse, came on and joined the brigade encamped in the dense pine thicket.

Deck Rollins, who had met him that morning, introduced him to his friends.

Kit Bandy made no attempt to arrest the man, nor did he intimate in any way that he knew him.

"Gentlemen, I should like to speak with the leader of your party in private," the old recluse said.

"All right; there he is," said Little Buckskin, pointing to Kit.

The old detective and the recluse stepped aside, and seating themselves, talked in low tones for several minutes.

When their conversation had ended, Alvandez returned to his cabin and Old Kit to his friends, rubbing his hands and smiling in glee as he said:

"Sure enough, that weddin' is likely to be a devolpe-ment of facts that'll paralyze the natives—a reg'ler ole stutterer. Boys, each an' all o' you want to see that your fightin' tools are in trim."

"Hullo!" said Tom Krome, the cowboy, "are we to have some pistol-music? Good! it's been a month since I've shot the hoofs off o' anything, an' I'm gittin' rusty."

The brigade remained concealed in the dark thicket, waiting and watching. About noon Zonita and her father came out from the cabin, bringing to their ambushed friends an abundance of well-cooked food.

The afternoon passed away and the shadows of evening began to gather.

As soon as it was dark Zonita lighted a candle and scarcely had its light dispelled the gloom of the cabin ere footsteps sounded outside and there came a rap upon the door.

Zonita arose, opened the door and admitted three men. One of them was her suitor, Captain Byron Postle, who introduced the others as Father Brennan and Jackson Drew. Brennan was dressed somewhat as a Romish priest, his face being smooth and cleanly shaven. Drew was a rough, bearded man, with anything but a pleasant countenance.

After they were seated Postle said:

"You must pardon me, Zonita, for not getting here sooner. I was delayed in finding Father Brennan."

"Oh, I assure you, captain, you are in plenty time," replied Zonita, in a calm voice.

"Then you have decided to accept my favors?"

"I am not sure that I have nor that I have not," was the girl's reply.

"Zonita, what do you mean?" asked Postle.

"Oh, I am so superstitious," she responded, with a sigh; "to-day when I walked alone un-

der the pines the little birds sung so strangely, I thought. They seemed to say, 'Beware, Zonita, beware, Zonita,' and then they would flutter nearer me and again seem to say, 'It's not for love, it's not for love.' And then I thought I heard a shriek of distress come up from the direction of the river, and the cry of a baby."

Postle looked uneasily at his friends, then, to conceal his emotions he indulged in a low, forced laugh, saying:

"You are superstitious, Zonita, indeed; but that comes of living here in this lonely, dreary, darksome place. Once out of this, in God's sunlight amid the gayety and festivities of civilization, all this will pass away."

"That may be very true, but I might live as happily here with my father, as with a husband in the gayety of civilization. Married life is not always a happy life. Only a day or two ago a poor Indian woman came dragging her bleeding form to our door saying that she had been shot down by her husband, a white man, and dragged into the bushes and left for dead."

"You are jesting, are you not, Zonita?" exclaimed Postle, his face, voice and actions denoting the restlessness of a guilty conscience.

"No, she speaks the truth, captain," said Senor Alvandez.

"The poor thing," Zonita went on, appearing to take no notice of Postle's nervousness, yet inwardly rejoicing at her power to keep him upon the torture-rack, "had bled almost to death from her wounds. Father and I laid her on yonder cot, dressed her injuries, gave her some food and restored her to consciousness. Then she began to mourn for her baby which she had left asleep in her canoe when she went ashore where she met her husband. So I put on my hood and cloak and after night went in search of it and found it down the river whither it had drifted in the canoe; and when I gave it to that poor mother, I could not help crying to see how happy she was. I only tell this to show you that married life is not all sunshine."

"That was an exceptional case, which doubtless grew out of the disparity between the Indian squaw and the white husband—no congeniality of social standing, education, and so forth," said Father Brennan.

"That might all have been, yet he was not justified in trying to murder her," replied Zonita.

"No; that is very true," affirmed Postle; "he must have been a monster."

"Do you think such a man worthy of any woman's love, captain?" the girl asked.

"Not at all, not at all, Zonita," Postle replied, "but did she tell you her husband's name?"

"She called him White Pine."

"And what became of her?"

Before Zonita could answer there came a loud rap upon the door that startled the inmates of the cabin.

Zonita arose, and with a hesitating step advanced and opened the door. She started back as she did so, for the light revealed the tall figure of a man standing outside. It was Kit Bandy, but she appeared not to recognize him.

"Good-evenin', miss," the old detective said; "do ye ever keep a lone, lost pilgrim over night at your house, eh?"

"Come in," said Senor Alvandez; "we never turn a benighted traveler away even though we can give him but the floor for a bed."

"Good enough for me," said Bandy, bulging into the room without further ceremony, then, on seeing so many present, he continued:

"Horn of—plenty! must keep a caravansary; or is thar a funeral, or a weddin' goin' on?"

At sight of him Postle turned to his friends and said in an undertone:

"By heavens! that's the mau, Jack Salts, that was at the Mecca to-day and the man, Shadrac Poppel, that tricked the boys out of their prisoner up the mountain the other night! There's something in the wind here to-night."

Meanwhile Zonita was saying to the old detective:

"Weddings sometimes turn out to be worse than funerals."

"What, my little gal?" replied the old man; "no need of a funeral here to-night. If you're to be the bride, and the groom hasn't come, jist substitute me, Old Jack Salts, for him, and see what a delicious old husband I'll make you."

"Mr. Salts, permit me to introduce you to my father, Senor Alvandez, and to Father Brennan, and Captain Postle, and Jack Drew," said the maiden, performing her duty of hostess unabashed by the old man's remarks.

"Jack Drew!" exclaimed Bandy, as he turned

to that individual, "be you Jack Drew, the detective?"

The man looked Kit straight in the eye for a moment, and then replied:

"Jack Drew's my name, sir."

"Glad to meet you, Jack," said the old detective, seating himself on a box in one corner of the room.

"Captain," said Zonita, now turning to Postle, "you asked me awhile ago what became of the discarded wife of White Pine: she is here," and as she spoke, Zonita pushed aside a curtain door opening into an adjoining room, from which appeared, with tottering footsteps, the Indian woman, June!

At sight of her Postle sprung to his feet, his face ghastly with horror and rage, and his eyes glaring like a beast at bay.

"Oh, White Pine!" cried the squaw, grasping her brow and starting back with terror: "do not strike me! do not shoot! I am your wife!"

"And this, then," said Zonita, gliding from the little room with the squaw's child in her arms, "is your baby, Senor Postle, so you see now why I cannot—will not marry you!"

"That squaw!" thundered Postle, "is an impostor! I denounce her as an Indian outcast!"

At this moment, Bandy crossed the room, opened the door and called out:

"Ho, boys, come in."

Almost instantly Little Buckskin entered the room followed by Tom Krome and the rest of the brigade, Bob Malvern being the last to enter.

At sight of the latter Postle's face grew livid with rage. He grasped his revolver, but before he could draw it, Kit Bandy presented his pistol at the fellow's head, saying, in a tone that almost froze the villain's blood:

"Don't dare to do it, old polygamy!"

At sight of Postle, Bob Malvern started back in apparent surprise, exclaiming:

"Good heavens! We meet again, Paul Dumont!"

"Treachery! treachery!" hissed the pretended priest, Brennan, and with a movement like that of a cat, he sprung out through the open door, knocking the light out as he did so, and wrapping all in gloom.

Then followed excited cries, the shuffling of feet toward the door, the crack of revolvers in and out of the cabin, the fall of bodies, groans of agony, shouts of men, and shrieks of women.

CHAPTER XIV.

A DYING MAN'S CONFESSION.

THE conflict was over within a few moments, although a score of shots had been fired in the dark—most of them outside the cabin.

Alvandez hastened to relight the lamp. Its light shone upon a scene of blood. Tom Krome lay dead upon the floor. The reputed Jack Drew lay writhing in fearful agony. Bob Malvern had got a bullet through the fleshy part of his left arm. June, the Indian wife of the villain Paul Dumont, for he White Pine, alias Byron Postle was, had fallen backward into the adjoining room and lay dying from a hemorrhage of the wound received at the hand of her husband the day before, while her babe lay at her side, all unconscious of the terrible tragedy that had just been enacted.

Paul Dumont and Father Brennan had escaped in the darkness.

The dead cowboy was removed to one side of the room. Zonita gave her attention to the dying June, assisted by her father, while Kit Bandy gave his assistance to the wounded Jack Drew.

"Old feller," said the detective, "you're pretty badly used up, ar'n't you?"

He answered in terrible groans and frightful curses.

"I'm shot to pieces!" he finally gasped; "but where is Dumont and Utah Bill? Did they escape?"

"Ah! then Father Brennan is Utah Bill?" said Kit.

"Yes, yes; and I must suffer for their sins and die like a dog, while they go free to drag down others. What a fool I've been!"

"And I ruther think you're not Jack Drew—not the Jack I know."

"No, my name is Redmon," replied the dying man.

"A follower o' Utah Bill and Paul Dumont?"

"Not exactly a follower of Utah Bill's, but a boon companion of Paul Dumont's."

"Would you mind tellin' me what Dumont had to do with the abduction o' Colonel Darre?" asked Bandy.

"Nothing more than to point out to Utah Bill the chance of getting a good sum of money for the colonel's release. Utah Bill did all that work, but the capture of the young man, Bob Mal-

vern, was the work of Dumont, and had he not been rescued when he was he would have—well, no matter. But this man, Alvandez, whose real name is Estaban, has been wronged the worst of all by me and Dumont, all for the sake of gold. It was known to us that his daughter, Zoe, through her dead mother, became heiress to an immense fortune, and Paul resolved to get hold of a part of it, at least, by marrying her. So he set about trying to win her affections, and failing in this he had recourse to murder. We knew that Estaban and Colonel Arizpa were intimate friends, and one evening when they were taking a walk, an arm was suddenly thrust from the thick bushes at the roadside, and a knife driven into and left in Arizpa's heart. Estaban seized the knife to draw it out, and just as he did so, Paul Dumont sprung from the bushes on the opposite side of the road, seized Estaban and yelled 'murder.' Help came, and the man was hurried to prison for the murder of Arizpa. Dumont stood ready to swear he saw the death-blow dealt by Estaban; but that night I and another friend of Paul's bribed the jailer and got Estaban away and bade him flee for his life. Paul expected then to compel his daughter to marry through threats of revealing her father's whereabouts, but to his surprise the girl fled with him. It was two years before we found them living here in seclusion. To-night was to have witnessed his marriage with Zoe and the achievement of his great aim. The man who did kill Arizpa is now dead."

"Did you ever hear him say anything of bein' engaged to a lady in the South?"

"Yes, to the daughter of Colonel Darre."

"Exactly; and did you ever hear him speak of bein' married to an Ingin woman?"

"Often. He was always confidential with me, and in a laughing way spoke many times of his Ingin wife, June."

"The royal devil! He's been playin' it fine a gold-minin'."

"He has paying interests," said Redmond, "in the Leadville and Deadwood mines, but he, like my own miserable self, thought more of money made in reckless, wicked adventures than by honest labor."

"I've been onto Paul's racket these weeks and months," said Old Kit. "Over six months ago Colonel Darre heard some way or other that his future son-in-law was a married man, and also a member o' Utah Bill's band, and so he went to St. Louis and there employed a detective, the original Jack Drew, and sent him West to look up Paul's standin' among the mountaineers. At Fort Lyons Drew was taken sick and turned the work over to me, and now if I can find the colonel I think I am ready to report."

"He felt so sure of Zoe and her fortune," said the dying outlaw, "that he was very willing that Utah Bill should make all he could out of Colonel Darre. But let me warn you that it's dangerous to remain here long, for Bill can bring a dozen desperate men against you before to-morrow noon."

This confession was listened to by Bob Malvern, Deck Rollins and Old Kit, and when young Rollins afterward told Zonita and her father of the confession exculpating Don Estaban from the murder of his friend, the maiden clasped her father about the neck and the two wept and rejoiced together.

Redmon lingered along until after midnight, dying in great agony.

A consultation was finally held by the brigade, and it was decided to continue the search for Colonel Darre. Little Buckskin and young Lawrence were dispatched to Whisky-Famine to watch the movements of Dumont and Utah Bill.

In the mean time Old Kit had taken measures at the cabin to guard against a night surprise by the foe.

CHAPTER XV.

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND.

UTAH BILL and Paul Dumont both escaped from the cabin unharmed, and fast as their legs would carry them they hurried from the vicinity of their inglorious defeat.

They made their way back to Whisky-Famine, speaking but a few words until they were safely in Dumont's room in the camp.

Lighting a candle, Dumont brought out a bottle of liquor, and after they had emptied it, they seated themselves and entered into conversation.

"Don't this night's work beat Satan?" was Dumont's first observation.

"I should say so," replied the outlaw, Utah Bill; "I reckon poor Redmon was killed."

"Curse that black-eyed centipede, Zonita! She is the one that set the trap for me. Gads! I have lost everything, Bill. Even that mudsill, Bob

Malvern, must turn up there to-night; but I put in a shot at him while on the retreat, and I rather think he got his last sickness. I hope so, at least. And that wench of a squaw! I supposed she was deader'n the mother of Adam. Just think of it! Could a more disastrous thing have happened to me and my prospects?"

"I can't conceive of anything worse, I assure you; but I now see that that whole outfit is a gang of detectives, and shrewd ones they are, too. From this on, Whisky-Famine's going to be unhealthy for me, and if I get through with Darre's ransom safely, I'll do well."

"Bill, hadn't you better give that up?"

"Never, till I have to," was the emphatic reply.

"It would be better for me, for the colonel's daughter's all I've got to fall back on now, and even that recourse will be a deuced dangerous one to handle since Paul Dumont's been caught at some of his tricks. But I could march into the cavern and release the colonel and make him believe I'd rescued him, and that my associations with you were all a scheme to effect his release."

"That all may be, Paul," replied Bill, with a tinge of sarcasm, "but simply because you lost to-night is no reason I should lose to-morrow. We went into this matter on the square. I stood by you till the last, and now I expect you to stay by me."

Dumont, half-angry, rose and paced the floor uneasily.

It was evident that the best of feeling did not exist between the two scoundrels at that moment.

Finally Utah Bill left his friend's room and sought his own quarters.

Paul Dumont sat down and for fully an hour was engaged in deep reflection.

Then he arose, put out his light and stole softly out of the cabin and moved away down the valley.

Two skulking figures glided from the shadows of the building and followed him.

With rapid strides the restless villain pushed on and on till he reached the river, down whose course he turned.

Down the river for three or four miles went the man, then leaving the stream he took across the hills in the direction whence the brigade had come two days previous.

"By smoke," whispered Buckskin to his companion, "the varmint, I guess, is headed for the Black Pool!"

"To drown himself, I hope," replied Lawrence.

The boys followed on, but owing to the darkness and the tortuous windings they lost all hearing of their man, and were compelled to give up the pursuit. But they did not turn back, but sat down to wait for daylight, determined to push on to the Black Pool at all hazards.

Fortunately they had not long to wait, for the night was well advanced, and, with the first streaks of dawn, they were up and off flying over the hills and through dark defiles with nimble feet and determined spirits. And ere they were aware of their proximity to the pool they were startled by the roar and rush of its waters a short distance in advance.

Slackening their speed, they approached the dread pool with cautious steps, keeping under cover of the pines.

When but a few rods from the rapids Little Buckskin caught sight of a man picking his way along a narrow, rocky ledge overhanging the waters of the whirlpool on the right.

"By smoke!" said the young borderman; "Lawrence, that's that smooth-faced villain, Utah Bill!"

"It's the fellow that man, Redmon, said was him," said Lawrence.

The outlaw, for it was Utah Bill, moved slowly and carefully along the narrow way; for one false step would hurl him into the seething waters below.

He had proceeded perhaps a rod when, in rounding a point of rocks, he came suddenly face to face with Paul Dumont, who was being followed by an old man—none other than Colonel Zebulon Darre!

The two men stopped short and glared at each other a moment like wild beasts.

"Ha, Paul Dumont! I have caught you in your base treachery!" Utah Bill finally hissed out; "I mistrusted this, and followed you!"

"Bill, I promise you all you ask," replied Dumont; "this old man shall not lay and rot in that dismal cavern."

"Who the deuce is that, Paul?" thundered the old colonel, all of his old-time irritability manifesting itself; "knock him over into the flood or walk over his vile body."

"Old man, don't forget that I am your cap-

tor," said Utah Bill, "and it was through the suggestion of your friend Dumont that I had you waylaid near Zane's Ranch and captured, to be held for ransom."

"Colonel," said the cowardly Dumont, "it's a lie—a base—"

Before Dumont could repeat the word, the outlaw sprung at him like a tiger and endeavored to knock him over the ledge; but Dumont was on the alert, and the two grappled.

Colonel Darre started to assist Dumont, but before he could render any help, the combatants lost their balance and shot downward into the flood, a wild cry of horror trailing from their lips.

Darre started back, his face the picture of terror; then he glanced over the ledge and caught sight of the two men as they went down in the swirling waters, followed by one of the ghastly corpses that Bob Malvern had seen a few days before tossing about in the pool.

With his soul filled with horror the colonel hurried along the ledge and reached the bank at the lower end of the pool.

"Hullo, there, old man!" suddenly called out a voice from the shadows, and the colonel started and glanced around him.

"Who the deuce calls me?" the excited man replied.

"Me, Little Buckskin," replied the young hunter, and he and young Lawrence advanced toward the colonel.

"Little Buckskin? What, that boy that lives down on the Arkansas?"

"Yes, sir."

"What in blazes are you doing here?"

"Hunting for an old bear called Colonel Darre."

"That's my name, boy; that's my name. Come, hurry up here and jump into this water and help me—"

"No, I don't jump into that water, for that's the Black Pool, and he who goes in there never gets out alive. That's the place for them two fellers—we seen them roll in—the infernalated rascals. One is old Utah Bill, and the other is his pard, Paul—"

"I don't b'lieve it—not a word of it!" growled the colonel.

"See here, old man, you don't want to cork yourself," replied Buckskin. "If you don't believe it, follow us and we'll take you to where Old Kit Bandy is, over here in the mountains, and he'll tell you the kind of truck them fellows are made of. We've been huntin' for you three days and nights, and if you don't want to be found, go jump into that pool and drown yourself."

"Such rascally, boyish impudence I never heard!" stormed the colonel; "but say; if you fellows are here to help me out of this condemned country, why don't you start and not stand here cackling like chimpanzees?"

"All right! Come on!" and turning, the three started off through the mountains.

The journey to the cabin was a long and tedious one for the colonel, and more than once they had to stop and rest.

When about a mile from the home of Alvandez, the trio came upon Old Kit Bandy, who was out on a reconnoissance; and with his young breast swelling with many pride at their success in finding Darre, Little Buckskin introduced the colonel to the old detective.

"By the horn o' Joshua! I'm glad to meet you, colonel," Old Kit averred, shaking the colonel's hand.

"Well" responded the old Kentuckian, "I'd be a condemned sight gladder to meet with a carriage going my way."

"S'pose so, colonel, but, as I said before, I'm glad to meet you. I've somethin' to report to you."

"Ah! I remember now, you're Kit Bandy, the detective that Jack Drew turned some matters of mine over to. Well, what have you found out about Paul Dumont?"

"I've found out that he's a murderer, a much married man, and the pard of the outlaw, Utah Bill."

"Blazes! you don't say?"

"I do; and just last night he came down to a cabin, not far from here, expecting to marry again, but his Injun wife was thar, and I was thar, and some other folks was thar, and the weddin' broke up in a shootin' affair, and Paul skipped out."

"Curse him!" exclaimed the colonel; "he's got his deserts!"

"How's that?"

"He's dead," explained Buckskin; "he and Utah Bill got into a fight, and tumbled into the Black Pool."

"And we left the scoundrels," added the colo-

nel, "waltzing over and under the boiling flood, chased by other lifeless victims of the pool and of that cut-throat, Utah Bill."

"They have sown the wind and reaped the whirlwind, then," remarked Bandy.

After some further conversation the four moved on toward the cabin. As they approached it they passed three newly-made graves under the waving pines, when Bandy said:

"There's where we buried the victims of last night's fray. That first grave holds the poor, broken body of June, Dumont's Injun wife. That second grave's whar Dumont's best man lies. He made a clean breast of all his and Paul's villainy before he passed over the dark river. And that third grave is whar Tom Krome lies—"

"Tom Krome, from Zane's ranch?" exclaimed Darre.

"Yes, he war killed in the fight, poor feller."

They passed on and entered the cabin, where the return of the two boys was hailed with joy.

Colonel Darre was introduced to Alvandez and his daughter, and while the old man was giving free expression to his opinion regarding that country, Bob Malvern also entered the cabin.

"Thunder and Mars!" the old colonel cried, starting back as if from danger; "do my eyes deceive me? Do I see that impudent young scoundrel, Bob Malvern?"

"You do, sir," was the cool reply.

"Get out of my presence, con—"

"Hold on, Colonel Darre!" interrupted Bob; "you're not on your own premises now, but in the great Rocky Mountains."

"That's so, that's so, boy," replied the old man, a spirit of contrition suddenly overcoming him; "I'm an old fool, and I'll bet on it! Come around here, Bob Malvern, and kick me all over this room—I deserve it."

"No, no, colonel, I forgive you; you have been persecuted enough."

"All right, Bob, all right. If I ever git out of this infernal country and back home, I'd be glad to see you in Kentucky."

"Thank you, colonel," replied Bob, feeling that he had at last won a brilliant victory over the obstinate old man.

"I came out West for my health," Darre went on, "some weeks ago, but I prefer the malaria of the South to the banditti of the West. Augusta is down at Zane's Ranch."

"Yes, I had the pleasure of meeting her a few evenings ago," admitted Bob.

"The deuce you did! When? Since I've been on this tour to the mountains?"

"Yes, sir; she was in great distress about you."

"The poor child! Say, when'll we get away from here?"

"To-morrow morning," assured Little Buckskin, with a smile, "if nobody corks himself."

CHAPTER XVI.

HOMEWARD BOUND.

BRIGHT and early the next morning our friends, accompanied by Alvandez and his daughter, left the cabin in the mountains and started down the Arkansas river.

Little Buckskin turned his horse over to Zonita and the now orphan baby, that had been thrown upon the kindness and charity of the party.

In due course of time they reached Zane's Ranch, and here the party broke up after a day's sojourn.

Senor Alvandez and his daughter were the first to depart. Old Kit Bandy and Ichabod Flea, who had joined the company in the mountains, going with them to assist in establishing the innocence of Alvandez of the murder of Arizpa.

Before parting Zonita and young Rollins held a private interview, and when they bade each other good-by it was with the sublime consciousness that the future held greater happiness in store for them both.

And before leaving Zane's Bob Malvern received a second invitation from Colonel Darre to visit them at their home, in Kentucky, and when Augusta learned of her father's reconciliation she told her lover that when he came to see them she would name the day when they would realize the fulfillment of their cherished hopes.

The amateur hunters remained fully a month longer with Little Buckskin, putting in the time in hunting and trapping with splendid success—finally ending their season of sport in a grand buffalo-hunt over on the head-waters of the Republican under the leadership of the Boy Centaur of the Prairies, Little Buckskin.

THE END.

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